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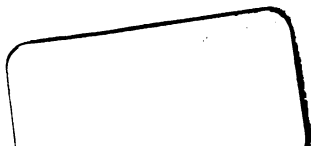
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SHE WAS YOUNG, AND HE WAS OLD.

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SHE WAS YOUNG

AND

HE WAS OLD.

A Novel.

BY THE AUTHOR OF 'LOVER AND HUSBAND.'

'Some narrow hearts there are
That suffer blight when that they fed upon;
As something to complete their being, fails;
And they retire into their holds and pine,
And, long restrain'd, grow stern. But some there are
That in a sacred want and hunger rise,
And draw the misery home and live with it,
And, excellent in honour, wait, and will
That somehow good will yet be found in it,
Else wherefore were they born?'



IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

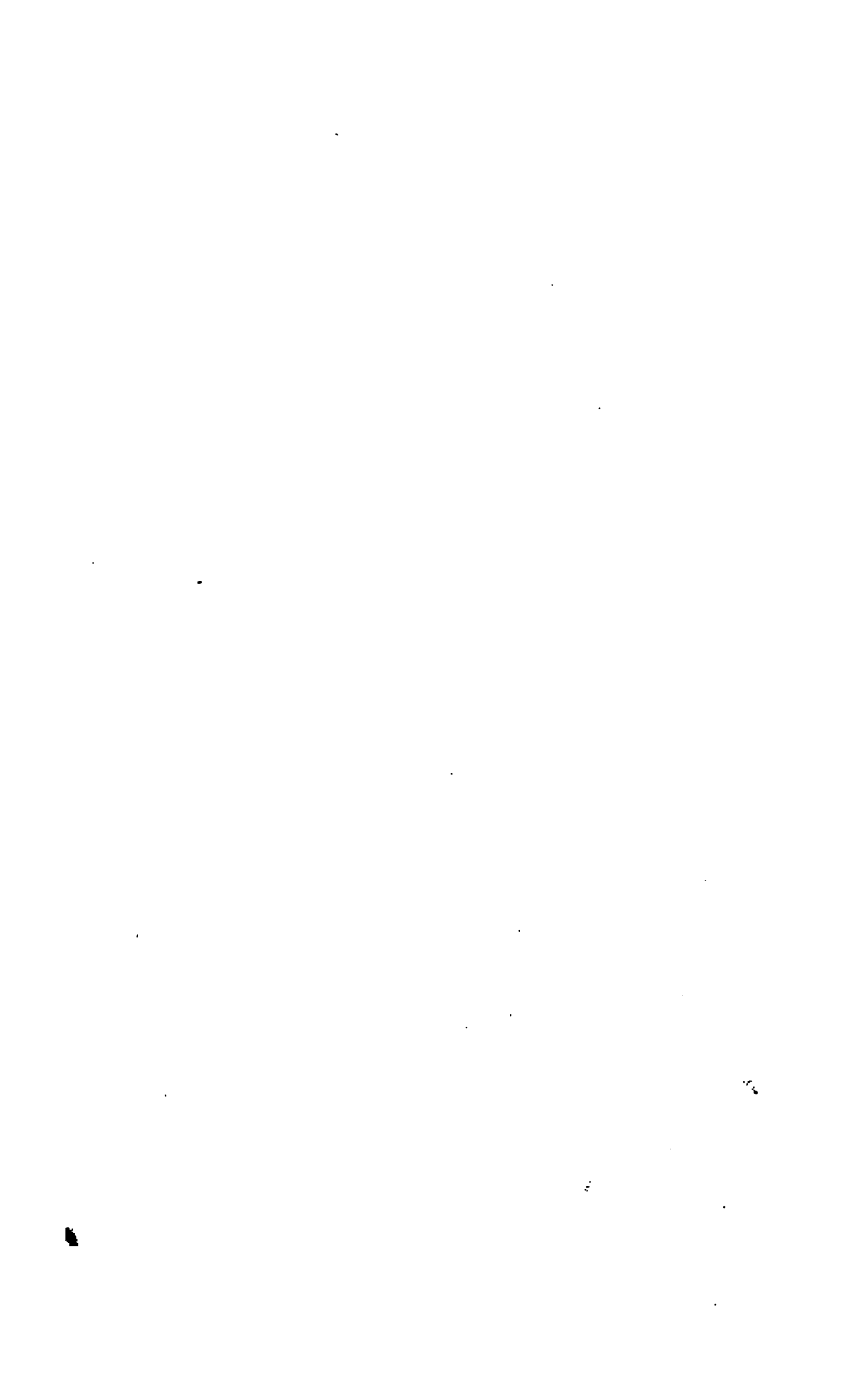
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SHE WAS YOUNG,
AND HE WAS OLD.



CHAPTER I.

AU DOUX REPOS.

‘A pair of friends, though I was young,
And Matthew seventy-two.’

The Fountain.

It was not England—that, a glance would have told. But though, to the lovers of open fireplaces and brussels carpet, the large, somewhat bare room might have struck chill and comfortless, its aspect, to eyes accustomed to rooms of its class, was far from uninviting.

Midwinter is certainly not the season one would choose for visiting Switzerland; but if it is one's fate to be far from British comfort when Christmas is at

hand, there are, after all, worse places to meet the old friend in than the *campagne* of M. le Pasteur Montluc, half a mile out of the, in those days, primitive little French-Swiss town of Rochette.

The house was a good one, well built and commodious, and M. le Pasteur was not a little proud of it, in which pardonable appreciation of the good things of this life, Madame Montluc (one felt often inclined to call her 'Madame le Pasteur') was by no means behindhand. For there was a madame—a substantial and unmistakeable better half of the kindly, vivacious, slightly heterodox little priest, who, twice on Sundays, and once at an evening prayer-meeting during the week, expounded to the irreproachably Protestant inhabitants of Rochette his views, or what he imagined to be such, on many and perplexing doctrines—not always to the perfect satisfaction of his hearers, nor, not improbably, to his own. But he laboured away, poor little man, with unflagging energy, at the old task of reconciling the irreconcilable and explaining the incomprehensible; and if in the attempt he muddled himself now and then, he may surely be forgiven; the more readily as, though there was not much moral teaching in his *discours*, there was plenty of practical goodness in his life.

It was not to these same *discours*, however, spoken or written, that the worthy couple was indebted for the comfortable little income that was more than sufficient to meet the rent of 'Le Doux Repos,' and to provide all suitable provision of every kind for its several inhabitants.

To which special sect of the many then existing in French Switzerland, non-conforming to the Protestant *église établie*, the little pasteur belonged, I cannot say; but whichever it may have been, it certainly resembled its sister societies ('sisterhood' unfortunately by no means implying the existence of affectionate or even amicable relations) in the exceeding scantiness of the pittance doled out to the shepherds of its flocks. But then Madame Montluc was a woman of resources, a helpmate worthy of the name; and on the principle of turning all talents to account, she had, some few years previous to this time, opened a *pensionnat* for ladies, both young and old. The more ambitious among these profited by French and German lessons, which their host in his leisure hours was well qualified to give; besides which advantages, there were others at command, in the persons of masters and mistresses of every desirable accomplishment,

whose instruction was to be had at a far from exorbitant rate, both at Rochette itself, and the adjacent more important town specially devoted to the education of both sexes.

Madame's enterprise proved successful. The *pensionnat* had rarely a vacancy, and really deserved its high reputation; for madame, though the least little bit in the world of a scold when unusually exasperated, was in a general way kindly and considerate, and certainly looked well after the creature comforts of her boarders. These ladies were, as I have said, of various ages, ranging from the incontestably old-maidish Misses Jennings, for the first time in their prim lives spending a few months in foreign parts, to little Georgie Urquhart, a child of nine, who with her widowed, invalid mother, and elder sister Eleanor, had been so long a member of the Montluc household, that her childish memory hardly reached back to the few years of her short life that had preceded their taking up their quarters *au Doux Repos*.

Monsieur was, for a wonder, the only inhabitant of the large salon this snowy January afternoon. Something had gone wrong with the flues of the stove in his own little sanctum, and he was perforce obliged to establish himself in the more public apartment,

grumbling a little, so far as he ever did anything so naughty, at the extreme perversity of the flues in choosing this very coldest day of all the cold winter to go wrong on.

The salon stove was behaving to perfection; the double windows were beyond suspicion well fitting; the room *should* have been warm; but somehow, in comparison with the snuggerly across the passage, it felt the very reverse. Evidently too—an additional trial to Monsieur's sociable disposition, especially in its present unsettled mood—*toutes ces dames* had arrived at a somewhat similar opinion; for they had all retired to their respective bedrooms, where madame's liberality authorised good comfortable fires of wood and peat cakes, and where no fear of masculine intrusion deterred the Misses Jennings from the delights of 'toasting their toes' at the open fireplace, which in the salon (had it possessed such a luxury) would have appealed in vain to their decorous feelings.

Monsieur, for a little while, tried to console himself, by grumbling greatly, and fidgeting about. Finding apparently but little solace in these distractions, he 'finally,' as our American cousins say, established himself in a comfortable corner, with a

favourite divine in his hands, over whose dissertations he never suspected himself of having so much as nodded, till a tiny voice at his side roused him from what had in reality been a very sound half-hour's nap.

The light in the room was fading fast by now, but Monsieur, though hardly awake, was at no loss to guess the owner of the gentle, half-apologetic little voice. There might be several of *ces dames* under his roof, but only one *notre petite demoiselle*, as Georgie Urquhart, the pet and darling of all, from the half-witted boy who cleaned the boots to Madame herself, was always designated.

'Cher monsieur,' began the child, with scarcely a trace of English origin in her accent, 'je vous demande mille pardons de vous avoir reveillé, mais—' But here the voice, which had been somewhat unsteady throughout, subsided into half-repressed but unmistakable sobs.

M. Montluc was wide awake in an instant. 'Mais, Georgie, ma chérie, qu'y-a-t-il donc, mignonne ? Georgie, qui pleure ! Mais non. Calme-toi, mon enfant,' he exclaimed. 'Who, then, has vexed my little girl ?'

'Nobody, nobody, dear monsieur,' replied Georgie hastily, trying her best to check her tears ; 'but Nelly

promised me this morning we should go up the top of the hill to slide down in Alphonse's sledge. And then this afternoon mamma was so tired—*un petit peu exigeante*, monsieur,' she interpolated, though looking half ashamed of the rather disrespectful nature of the remark—'and Nelly could not leave her; and it began to get dark, and I knew it would be too late, and so I cried without anybody seeing me. Then Nelly sent me down to ask you if the *facteur* had come; and on my way downstairs the front doors were open, and I heard the boys all racing home with their sledges, and—and—'

Nearly out of breath by this time, the little maiden came to a standstill. Her childish story gave a little epitome of their lives. Mamma, alas, poor woman, often tired, not seldom *exigeante*; Nelly, though hardly more than a child herself, torn and harassed by the conflicting claims of mother and sister; poor little Georgie in an unnatural and undesirable state of repression, for Mrs. Urquhart could hardly bear her darling out of her sight, though the childish merriment and laughter were agony to her shattered nerves.

But it was only of late that things had been so bad. Mrs. Urquhart's illness, formerly but a gentle

invalidism, had increased terribly in the past few months. So terribly, that already to the loving eyes, with sight preternaturally sharpened by anxiety to discern every trifling variation in her symptoms, *the end* loomed forth in all its awful anguish. They had 'broken it' to Eleanor, by the poor invalid's own desire, long before it had been absolutely necessary to do so. And it had been well to do so. The mother had instinctively appreciated the strength and unselfishness of her child's nature, which already, in the first reaction from the grief that had all but prostrated her for a time, was turning for consolation, like a plant to the light, to the consideration of how best she could soothe and cheer the few remaining weeks of life, how relieve the dying woman's mind of undue anxiety for her children's future, by showing herself strong and self-reliant beyond her years, able not only to make her own way in the world, but to be father, mother, and sister in one to the child so soon to be left to her care.

M. Montluc looked grave as he listened to the melancholy recital of Georgie's troubles. 'Mon enfant,' he said, with the very slightest possible shade of reproach in his tone—'mon enfant, thou must, then, be reasonable. Who, thinkest thou, merits the

most to be called *exigeante* — the poor maman, so suffering, but so good, so gentle; or the little Georgie, who would not for one day bear cheerfully the disappointment of missing her play? The winter departs not yet, mignonne! Thou wilt yet have many days of frost for Alphonse's sledge. Calme-toi, ma chérie, mais calme-toi donc.'

But Georgie's tears were by this time those of very genuine repentance.

'O, I am *so* sorry, dear monsieur, so very, very sorry. It grieves Nelly so when I am cross, and I know my face looked cross when she told me to run down to see if the letters had come. And O, I am forgetting to ask if they have come.'

'Les voici!' exclaimed Monsieur, as just then a step was heard coming along the stone passage, and Rosette the housemaid appeared with the letters in the corner of her apron.

'Deux pour Monsieur, point pour Madame, huit pour ces dames. Non, mademoiselle,' in reply to Georgie's eager glance of inquiry, 'pas une pour madame votre maman.'

'O, poor mamma!' said the child; 'she will be *so* sorry; I must run and tell Nelly. Please, *dear* monsieur, don't go away till I come back. I want

you to tell me a story, if Nelly doesn't want me upstairs. Won't you, dear monsieur ?'

Hardly waiting for a reply, off she ran. Rosette lingered a moment on her way to her own regions, while she listened to the nimble little feet clambering up the stone staircase, and then pattering along the passage overhead. '*Pauvre enfant!*' she ejaculated, simple peasant though she was, with the true woman's heart-pity for the unconscious child so very soon to be an orphan.

'She has just fallen asleep,' were the whispered words that met Georgie, as she softly opened the door of her mother's room, shaking her curly head in anticipation of the well-known question, 'Letters?' 'I am glad she is asleep,' continued Eleanor; 'it is the first rest she has had to-day; but she will be sadly disappointed when she wakes. I *cannot* think why that old man does not write. It does seem so unkind.'

She leaned her head wearily on the table beside her as she spoke. Georgie nestled close to her, and stroked and kissed her in uncomprehending sympathy.

'Nelly, I am so sorry I was so cross this afternoon.'

‘Never mind, dear. You were disappointed, I know; and so was I for you,’ replied the elder sister.

Then there fell a few moments of perfect silence in the room. The fire-light danced cheerily on Nelly’s dark and Georgie’s golden head, and flickered, half wistfully it seemed to Nelly as she watched it, on the drawn white face, so thin, so worn, but, O, so dear, of the sleeping mother on the sofa.

‘Is mamma worse to-day, Nelly?’ whispered the child, with a sudden anxiety born of her self-reproach for the petulance of the afternoon.

‘I don’t know, dear; I hope not,’ answered Eleanor. ‘But our whispering may wake her.’

‘Come to the big window in the passage with me for a minute, Nelly,’ begged Georgie; ‘the stars are coming out, and they do look so pretty. I saw them when I was coming upstairs.’

They crept softly out of the room, and stood a few moments at the window, gazing up at the old friends appearing one by one in unusual radiancy and brilliance through the clear frosty air.

‘Aren’t they *very* pretty to-night, Nelly?’ said the little sister; but the elder made no reply. ‘How is it, Nelly,’ resumed Georgie, whose tongue, it must be confessed, was seldom at rest for many moments

together—‘how is it that pretty things make me think of quite other pretty things, not the least bit like them? Now just fancy what the stars have made me think of now.’

‘What, dear?’ said Eleanor, somewhat absently.

‘Of that night we had been at Alphonse’s mother’s at tea, and it was so late when we were all coming home, nearly nine o’clock, and we heard the students singing as we came over the bridge. Don’t you remember, Nelly?—their voices sounded so far away, even though we heard them so plain, and it nearly made me cry.’

‘Yes, I remember,’ answered Nelly; ‘I remember quite well. It was *Wenn die Schwalben* they were singing—*Wenn die Schwalben heimwärts fliehen*; I shall never forget it. O, Georgie, Georgie, if only you, and mother, and I, could fly away home together, and never have to leave each other! *Anywhere* would be home, where we were sure of that. O, my darlings, my darlings!’

She clasped the child to her almost convulsively, and for a moment it seemed as if the self-control of the last few weeks was about to desert her. But she recovered herself; and Georgie, being occupied in vehemently hugging her sister by way of express-

ing her appreciation of Nelly's unusually demonstrative affection, did not see the anguish in the young face bent over her—did not feel the tears that fell on her curly head.

‘Dear Nelly, darling Nelly!’ cooed the child.

‘Now run away down out of the cold,’ said Eleanor in her ordinary tone. ‘Perhaps some of the young ladies are playing the piano in the *salon*, and you will like to listen to them.’

‘No, they’re not,’ said Georgie, ‘but Monsieur is there; and, O, I forgot, he’s going to tell me a story, and I said I’d be back in a minute. I’ll come up and tell you when tea’s ready, Nelly.’

‘Yes, do, dear,’ said Eleanor, as she softly opened the door, and resumed her watch by her still sleeping mother.

A quarter of an hour or thereabouts passed in perfect quiet; then Mrs. Urquhart moved uneasily, sighed softly, and woke. Her first glance fell on Eleanor, seated on a footstool near her sofa, watching intently for the first sign of waking.

‘Nelly my child, have you been sitting by me all this time?’ exclaimed the mother; ‘you must be quite wearied out. I must have slept an hour at least. Has Georgie been upstairs? I fancied I

heard her voice through my sleep. I was dreaming of you both. But, O, it must be post-time by now! Will you run, Nelly dear, and see if there are any letters?’

‘Any letters’ meant, as the expression so often does, but one; *the* one for which the poor invalid had looked in vain for a weary succession of days. Eleanor hesitated a moment in her reluctant reply.

‘No, dearest mother, there is no letter,’ she said softly; ‘Georgie came up again to say so. I only wish I had a chance of telling that cold-hearted old wretch what I think of him. It is inexcusably cruel of him to keep you so uneasy by not writing. I am certain he is a detestable old man, mother, and I wish you would believe me that we don’t want any guardian or trustee, or anything, if only you would not trouble your dear self so about us.’

She spoke with some little exaggeration of words and tone, half to change the sad current of her mother’s thoughts, half to conceal the only too ready response these found in her own mind. But it was no use. Mrs. Urquhart smiled faintly at the unflattering epithets Nelly heaped on the absent offender; but the smile told more of tears than amusement, as the girl’s last words betrayed the tenderness un-

derlying all her little affectation of impatience and indignation.

‘It does seem unkind of Mr. Marshall,’ the mother agreed; ‘but I cannot think it is his fault. I have always found him so very exact and considerate in the few arrangements I have had to make with him. “A thorough man of business,” your father used to call him, and I am sure I have always found him so.’

‘I hate thorough men of business,’ said Eleanor half laughingly. ‘Why such *very* simple business as ours can’t be left to ourselves to manage, I can not see. Somehow I dislike this Mr. Marshall very much, mother; I wish papa had not made him our guardian as well as you. I am sure he has troubled himself uncommonly little about us; and yet I have no doubt he believes we are under immense obligations to him.’

‘So we are, dear,’ replied Mrs. Urquhart, ‘though it is hardly the sort of obligation a child like you’ (‘A child, mamma!’ interjected Nelly, ‘when I’m past eighteen!’) ‘can be expected to feel much gratitude for. He has been really kind and disinterested in the extreme, in the way he has managed the very little there was to manage. You must not take up

any prejudice against him, Nelly, or let Georgie get any nonsense in her head, as she is so ready to do. Remember, Mr. Marshall was your father's chosen friend, and he did not choose his friends lightly. Mr. Marshall is really a good and most honourable man, though I daresay you would think him formal and prosy. You don't remember him, do you? It must be eight or ten years since you saw him.'

'I hardly remember him. He came to Georgie's christening, didn't he, just when papa first began to be ill? The regiment was in Ireland then, wasn't it—the year after we came home from India? O, yes, I remember it very well; and Mr. Marshall tried to take me on his knee, and I wouldn't be taken, because he had made a face when the baby cried! But never mind him, mother dear; I won't take any prejudice into my head, and I *never* put any into Georgie's. They come there of themselves fast enough, mother, I assure you; she is such a fanciful child. But, mother dear, even supposing Mr. Marshall doesn't write at all; supposing he is ill, got a stroke of paralysis, or anything of that kind—'

'Nelly, don't talk such nonsense, child,' inter-

rupted her mother ; ' he is not an old man—certainly not more than forty-five.'

' Well, dear, we won't call it paralysis, then. I was only meaning to comfort you a little bit,' went on Eleanor eagerly, ' by saying, even if the worst comes to the worst, and we don't hear from Mr. Marshall, you need not be unhappy about us. We *could* not have a kinder friend than Monsieur—and, for that matter, Madame too—if, if—you were getting worse, darling.' Here, in spite of herself, Nelly's voice faltered, and for a moment she hid her face in her mother's pillows. But she looked up again, and went on bravely. ' I know we shall be very poor ; but any way there would be enough to pay for Georgie's staying here and going on with her education ; and I was thinking I might get a situation as English governess in one of the best French families here, so that I could still be near Georgie and often see her.'

' My brave Nelly !' whispered Mrs. Urquhart, and one thin hand was laid for an instant approvingly on the girl's soft dark hair. That was all, but it was enough ; and through her anguish Eleanor felt her heart thrill with pleasure at the words. But both knew well that under the critical circumstances all

expression of feeling was best avoided, and in a more matter-of-fact tone the invalid continued: 'Some such plan has been in my mind, too,' she said; 'and, indeed, it is principally to *consult* him, that I am so anxious to hear from Mr. Marshall, if there is any possibility of my seeing him again. With all the good-will in the world, he cannot possibly make the little there will be other than very little. When my pension fails, there will be hardly more than Georgie's to count on; for in less than three years you, Nelly, will be twenty-one. And of our private means there is barely more than a hundred a year.'

'But for less than that M. Montluc would be willing to let us stay here,' said Eleanor; 'I am sure of that, though I know we have hitherto paid more. I could make myself useful to Madame in many ways.'

'I hardly think it would be desirable,' rejoined Mrs. Urquhart. 'Madame, though kindness itself at the bottom of her heart, is uncertain in temper. Then your position would be an undecided one, which is always trying, and would be all the more so here, where hitherto it has been different. No, I don't think it would do. Besides, Nelly, I should like you

to save some part of what certain income there is, in anticipation of the time when both remaining pensions will fail.'

'Yes, mamma,' answered Nelly; and the expression of grave consideration on her young face would have been laughable to any one unacquainted with the pathos underneath. 'Yes, mamma, I do not think I should spend all we have. Still, it will be a long time before Georgie will be of age, and she must have a good education. But what, then, do you think of my other plan—of getting a situation as English governess here?'

'That might do; but it is only a chance,' replied Mrs. Urquhart. 'You are so young, Nelly; and I fear your English education has been neglected for French and German. Why, child, you have hardly ever been in England, or read any of the best English books; and if your fate is to be a governess, I should like you to be a superior one, and to have some opportunities of going on improving yourself, which you would not have here. Besides, dear, kind as our friends here are, I have a shrinking from the idea of my children spending their whole lives in a foreign country, as would probably be the case if your plan was carried out.'

‘But we have no relations in England now, mother,’ said Eleanor sadly; ‘no near friends even. It may be years and years before my uncle comes home; and he could not do much for us, with so many children of his own.’

‘I know that,’ replied her mother; ‘I am not counting on help from any one, except your aversion—poor Mr. Marshall. And all I am hoping for from him even is, that he may put you in the way of obtaining a situation as governess in some really nice *English* family, where your thorough knowledge of French and German would be invaluable, and where you might go on with your own studies and reading in your leisure hours. This is what I should most like for you, dear.’

‘But Georgie,’ exclaimed Eleanor aghast—‘but leaving Georgie, mother?’

‘Ah, yes, dear, that is the worst of it,’ sighed Mrs. Urquhart; ‘and yet how it is to be avoided, I cannot see. At the very worst, Georgie might be left here for a time, if it were really impossible for you to remain together. But there *are* families who would not object to her accompanying you—rich people with an only daughter, for instance, whom they wanted a companion for. It is just pos-

sible some such arrangement might be made. All the more likely perhaps, as you are not actually penniless, like some poor girls. It is to talk over this idea of mine that I am so anxious to see Mr. Marshall. I am still sanguine, Nelly, you see,' she added, with a little attempt at a smile.

Nelly kissed the worn hand she held in hers.

'Darling!' she murmured under her breath.

After a few minutes' silence, Mrs. Urquhart spoke again :

'I have another objection to your remaining abroad, Nelly. A very silly one, you will think, I daresay. I should *not* like you to marry a foreigner. I cannot fancy you would be happy in such a marriage; little though you know of England, still you *are* English.'

Nelly smiled quietly, but without the least shade of embarrassment, as her mother spoke.

'I cannot fancy myself marrying any one,' she replied, 'Englishman or "foreigner," as you call everybody else, you funny old-fashioned darling. *Certainly* I would marry nobody who would not take Georgie too; and I suppose there are not many husbands who would care to have a sister saddled upon them, as well as a wife. No, mother dear, you may

be quite sure I shall never marry till Georgie does. And not then either; for just fancy how old I shall be by the time she is grown up! She is sure to marry, for she will be so pretty. And if I am not actually ugly, I am certainly not pretty—to any eyes but yours, at least. And besides, I *couldn't* marry unless you were there to advise me and tell me I was doing right. I could never choose for myself. O mamma, mamma, don't let us talk any more!

'No, dear, no,' said her mother soothingly; 'perhaps it was foolish of me to mention that fancy of mine. But you are so different from other girls, my Nelly; so unlike English girls of your age, who, far from wishing their parents to choose for them, as you call it, think, I do believe, that some amount of opposition is a pleasant addition to the affair. I am not half sure that I was without a spice of the feeling myself; but then, to be sure, our marriage *was* very imprudent,' she went on rather inconsequently, 'though no two people ever were happier than your father and I the few years we had together. Yes, Nelly dear, I hope you will marry some day; and you are not to talk nonsense about not being pretty. If you were only not quite so thin—'

'I should be "a burning beauty," as nurse used

to say,' interrupted Nelly laughingly. ' But, mother dear, you have been talking far too much. Now you are not to say another word till you have had your tea, and after that, Monsieur, dear little man that he is, is coming up to read you a French sermon, which is *quite* sure to put you to sleep.'

CHAPTER II.

INSTEAD OF A LETTER.

‘ I am much sorry, sir,
You put me to forget a lady’s manners.’

Cymbeline.

‘ I wonder not at the French for their dishes of frogs, snails, and toadstools. . . . Those national repugnances do not touch me ; nor do I behold with prejudice the French, Italian, Spaniard, and Dutch.’ *Religio Medici.*

GEORGIE was not disappointed of her ‘ story.’ A fairy-tale, *petite conte de fée charmante*, she begged for in the first place ; for plenty of such, she well knew, were to be found among the heterogeneous furniture of Monsieur le Pasteur’s brain. This was followed by scarcely less delicious fare in the shape of some national legends, whose original quaint grotesqueness Monsieur in no wise diminished by adding thereto touches of grace and delicacy, the beauty of which was all his own ; for many a more

attractive body has held a less truly poetical soul than that of the elderly little pastor. Children have an instinct in such matters. Monsieur should have been an improvisatore, and of more congenial matter than the theology of those days; and this little Georgie had long ago discovered, and took care to profit by on all possible occasions.

Half way through the most weird and thrilling of the legends, two or three of the young-lady boarders dropped in, forming, slightly to Monsieur's discomfiture, quite a cosy little audience. Among them was a Bernese girl, finishing her education at Rochette, in the vain hope of teaching her hopelessly Swiss-German tongue to discourse the French of her companions, which French, according to the inhabitants of Rochette, is the purest and most musical in the world: at the worst a harmless delusion, and not confined to one nation; for it is well known that if *we* were to subscribe to the creed of certain of our friends north of the Tweed, we should all betake ourselves to Inverness to learn to talk irreproachable English.

Adèle Braune, though her French was the reverse of musical, and her native German, to say the least, rather startling on first acquaintance, was a girl of

unusual amiability and fair intelligence. Her mind, though but slightly cultivated, was not without occasional flashes of originality; and a certain uncouth humour, joined to a rough but affectionate disposition, had procured for her among her companions the nickname of 'the Bernese bear.'

She seated herself among the other girls grouped round M. Montluc and Georgie, and listened quietly till the 'story' in process of relation was finished. Some point in the pastor's rendering of the legend having caught her attention as an innovation on the original, she ventured to disagree with the new version, and a very amusing and rather noisy discussion followed. So noisy, that no one of the little party heard a tap at the door, which was several times vainly repeated, each time more loudly and distinctly. At last it caught the ear of Monsieur himself; but encumbered as he was by the substantial little person of Miss Georgie Urquhart, coiled on his knees in her favourite position, getting up to open the door was not the easiest of achievements.

'Il y a quelqu'un qui frappe,' he exclaimed, beginning to disentangle himself. 'See, then, Adèle, who is there; thou art near to the door, my child.'

Great big Adèle obeyed promptly; and her round

face, red with the excitement of the recent discussion, was the first thing to meet the astonished eyes of the unexpected visitor, who, having knocked in vain at the so-called front door of the establishment, and finding it, after all, unlatched, had at last ventured timidly along the stone passage, and knocked again at the first door he came to. The sounds he heard in his five minutes' vigil outside the door inclined him to think that he had mistaken the directions given him in Rochette, and that instead of making his way to that most decorous of institutions, a boarding-school for young ladies—and a clergyman's house to boot—his ill fate, or more correctly speaking, exceedingly misty comprehension of French, had landed him on the threshold of a lunatic asylum! 'Though certainly,' he said to himself reassuringly, 'queer as things seem, they would never leave the door unlocked of such a place!'

The reception was, it must be confessed, a somewhat startling one to a middle-aged, not to say elderly gentleman, three-quarters of whose life had been spent in the most English of country towns, and whose whole experience of continental life had hitherto been comprised in two return-ticket regulation 'trips' to Paris, of a week each—under the convoy of a

widowed sister, some few years his senior. Perhaps it was as well that poor Adèle's height and width prevented the stranger's first view of the interior of the salon being other than an imperfect one; for though the scene would have delighted the eyes of an amateur photographer in search of picturesque grouping, it was the very reverse of any preconceived notions of the manners and customs of a *pension de demoiselles* that the poor gentleman might have formed on the model of an English boarding-school. The three or four girls of different ages and nations, all merry with the recent excitement of the battle of words between Monsieur and their favourite 'bear,' were lounging about—some on low stools, one or two on the floor, in various attitudes, all easy and comfortable in the extreme, all telling of the absence of the somewhat more rigorous madame—monsieur himself in the centre, Miss Georgie's golden head still nestling cosily on his shoulder, nothing being farther from that young lady's intention than any dislodgment of her small person from its present comfortable position, let who would come knocking at the door. The Misses Jennings, alas, were not of the party.

Adèle's French always became extra guttural and

unintelligible on an emergency. The few words of the dialogue that reached the little group showed plainly that the stranger, whose person was still concealed from view, understood her as little as she understood him ; but in her nervous anxiety to be of use she persisted in barring the door, and naughty Georgie clung to monsieur the more closely each time that he showed symptoms of going to the rescue.

‘ Don’t move, dear monsieur,’ she whispered ; ‘ *do* listen to bear’s French. It is such fun.’

Poor Adèle was fast subsiding to a series of ‘ *bardons*’ and ‘ *blait-ils*,’ in hopeless succession. The stranger had been hitherto floundering in a sea of uncompleted sentences, of which each commenced with ‘ *Esker* ;’ but on Adèle’s relapsing at last into silence, he made a more valiant attempt.

‘ *Esker Monsieur Mont* (that is the name surely ; yes, I have it in my hand)—*Mont Luke vive ici*—here, you know—*ici, eng cette maisong* ?’

The words sounded loud and plain in the silence that had fallen on all the party in the room, whose attention was now fully aroused. Georgie (whose English origin still sometimes triumphantly asserted itself) went off in a most audible and unladylike fit

of laughter. The stranger heard it, and his sorely tried patience began to give way. He waxed wroth, and, like a true John Bull, threw French to the dogs.

‘Is there no one in this house who can understand a plain question?’ he said, in a rather loud voice, accenting each word separately by way of making his meaning clearer. ‘I ask,’ he repeated, ‘is there no one who can answer a plain question? Does, or does not, Monsieur Mont Luke’ (here Georgie went off again) ‘live here? I am a stranger here, and—and—I suppose I have lost my way. Finding the door unfastened, I took the liberty of entering to make inquiry.’

Some part, but by no means the whole, of this sentence was intelligible to M. Montluc. Georgie, who should have acted interpreter, was still laughing and clinging to her friend. But Monsieur could be firm on occasion, even to his privileged pet.

‘Georgie, mon enfant, il faut absolument,’ he said, as he gently [put the mischievous little hands aside, and stepped to the door to greet the stranger with his usual simple courtesy; Georgie still clinging to his hand as her best chance of seeing the fun out, and poor Adèle, whose scattered wits were beginning

to return to her, taking refuge, figuratively speaking, behind Monsieur, of whom, literally, she might easily have made two.

‘I beg a thousand pardons,’ began the pastor in his clearest French, and speaking more slowly than his wont; ‘we amused ourselves so well, it appears we did not hear monsieur’s knock. It must be that Rosette also did not hear that monsieur knocked at the door. It may be that she is upstairs. I beg again a thousand pardons. Will monsieur, then, have the goodness to tell me in what way I can have the honour to serve him?’

The courtesy of the little gentleman’s manner disarmed the stranger of his annoyance and resentment. But he looked down at Georgie with considerable disapprobation, as, still quivering with half-suppressed laughter, she glanced up maliciously in his face, her blue eyes dancing with fun. ‘Monsieur Mont Luke?’ was his reply to the pastor’s apology, as he moved forward a step or two into the room.

‘Oui, monsieur; je suis le Pasteur Montluc, à votre service,’ answered that gentleman.

A look of relief overspread the somewhat heavy but not disagreeable features of the new-comer. He was a tall man, and must in his younger days have

been possessed of some amount of good looks. Now he stooped slightly, and his hair and rather closely-cut whiskers were gray. His expression was grave, but hardly forbidding, and there was a straightforward, unaffected look about the whole man, despite his formality and primness, that went some way towards prejudicing in his favour any one whose attention happened to be specially drawn to him. He was not, in short, a bad specimen of a middle-aged middle-class Englishman; narrow-minded probably, commonplace certainly; but a man nevertheless who one felt could be trusted to do his best disinterestedly, according to his light, and in selecting whom to be the guardian of his children the late Colonel Urquhart had shown a fair amount of discrimination and good sense.

For this was Mr. Marshall.

He speedily announced himself. 'My name is Marshall, monsieur,' he said slowly, and as if the fact were one of some importance,—'Marshall of Easterton. You have heard my name, I daresay, as that of a friend of Mrs. Urquhart's? Madame Urquhart, perhaps I should say,' he went on, seeing that though M. Montluc was listening to him with the greatest attention and politeness, his words were

evidently Greek, or rather not half so intelligible as Greek, to the worthy pastor. 'Yes, sir,' he repeated, 'I am a friend, a—a—what do you call it? amour, amang—that's it, surely — amang of Madame Urquhart's, and it is in consequence of a letter from that lady that I am here—yes, sir, here—ici, dang cette maisong.'

So far Georgie's merriment had been restrained to her eyes; but at the last unexpected relapse into French on the part of Mr. Marshall, it again broke forth, and the child, still clinging to M. Montluc's arm, literally shook with laughter. Mr. Marshall's frown deepened into a scowl, and even Monsieur began to look seriously displeased. But the word 'letter' had caught his ear as intelligible, and with a whispered 'Georgie, sois donc sage,' he hastened to act upon the happy thought.

'Monsieur fait parler d'une lettre?' he exclaimed; 'il s'agit donc d'une lettre? Lettère? Est-ce par hasard que monsieur aura écrit, mais—'

Georgie here interrupted the pastor's laborious attempts. Naughty child, she might long before have assisted her friend in his difficulty; but only the somewhat severe tone of his 'sois donc sage' had had power to recall her to proper behaviour.

'A letter,' she too exclaimed—'a letter from Mrs.

Urquhart? That's my mamma. Perhaps you've come instead of a letter? She's been expecting one every day, and Nelly and I have both said you were very unkind indeed not to write to poor mamma. Why didn't you, if it is you she meant?

The fluent English of the small person at his feet, and the coolness of her strictures on his taken-for-granted delinquencies, were equally unexpected and embarrassing to the unfortunate Mr. Marshall.

'Little girls,' he began in a severe tone; but the calm gaze of the great blue eyes staring up undauntedly in his face was too much for him. He dared not take refuge in Monsieur and French, with the terror before him of the mischief still lurking in the child's face breaking out again into laughter as mocking as before. He glanced at the other inhabitants of the room; but the sight of Adèle's red cheeks looming behind the pastor warned him to explore no farther. Georgie was his only chance; but, O, how he would have liked to shake her!

'Mrs. Urquhart is your mamma, you say, my dear,' he began in a conciliatory tone. 'I am very glad to hear it. That is to say, I hope your mamma is in better health than when she wrote, to judge by your very good spirits.'

The covert taunt fell unheeded on the innocent ears. Poor Georgie, why shouldn't she laugh? Mamma had always been ill more or less, and what little English girl could help laughing at this old gentleman's French and Monsieur's English? But her conscience was tender too. She slid back her little hand into her old friend's grasp, and glanced up at him appealingly for a smile of forgiveness, before replying to Mr. Marshall's inquiry.

'Yes, thank you,' she answered, with a demureness as much her own as her former audacity—'yes, thank you, my mother is much better. She was tired this afternoon; but just now when I was upstairs she was sleeping like a little angel. Shall I, then, run and tell Nelly that monsieur has arrived?'

'Nelly?' repeated Mr. Marshall doubtfully, for the un-English form of the question perplexed him.

'Yes, Nelly,' said Georgie again; 'Eleanor, my sister—Mademoiselle Urquhart. Shall I run to prepare her for seeing you, monsieur?'

'Ah, yes; ah, I beg your pardon,' replied the gentleman, unconsciously adopting the child's own tone; 'yes, perhaps you will be so good as tell your mamma, or your sister, that I—'

'Yes, yes,' interrupted Georgie, 'I know. I am

to say the gentleman has come, who should have sent mamma a letter, il y a bien longtemps;' and she was darting out of the room, when M. Montluc stopped her to inquire if she had discovered the stranger's name, and the reason of his coming so unexpectedly; and to beg her to ask her sister to come downstairs at once, without startling her mother. For during the dialogue between Mr. Marshall and Georgie it had dawned upon the pastor, that here might be in person the friend the invalid had so anxiously been hoping to hear from.

Georgie, in a hurry to run off to her sister with the news, was replying hastily to Monsieur's inquiries, when a step was heard coming along the passage, and Eleanor herself entered the room. Mr. Marshall guessed who she was before Georgie's 'O, Nelly!' came to enlighten him. He felt that his troubles were over as he looked at her, and rejoiced that he had not to deal with a grown-up edition of the mischievous, golden-haired elf that had so tormented him.

Never truly were sisters more unlike! The younger, a rosy, blooming miniature of the still lovely though sadly faded mother upstairs; the elder, dark-haired, soft-eyed, and pale, but with the clear, well-defined features she inherited from her father, far

from plain-looking, though the reverse of brilliant. She was tall, and promised some day to be graceful. Not that she was now, or ever could have been, *ungraceful*; but she was very thin, poor child, and her late anxieties had made her still thinner, and given her the worn look so strangely pathetic in a very young person; a look which ages a girlish face, and yet, in another sense, renders it more youthful.

‘Miss Urquhart,’ said Mr. Marshall, as he turned to greet her with much more alacrity than was usual in his manner on such occasions, ‘I am very glad to see you. I should have recognised you anywhere, from your likeness to my friend the Colonel. I have been in great difficulty for the last few minutes. I could not succeed in making myself understood by our good friends here.’

‘I am *very* sorry. I wish I had known; I would have come at once,’ said Eleanor, with real distress in her tones.

She stood looking up in her new friend’s face with such genuine apology in her eyes, that, prepossessed as he already was in her favour by her simple, unaffected bearing and unmistakable likeness to his old friend her father, his irritation could not but melt away.

‘Never mind, Miss Urquhart,’ he answered cordially. ‘I should be very sorry for *you* to distress yourself about it.’

‘But I can’t help it,’ she replied. ‘It does seem such a shame that there should have been any awkwardness on your first arrival; for, O, Mr. Marshall, it is so very, very good of you to have come all this long way yourself! But Georgie was here,’ she added, as the thought suddenly struck her; and she looked round for the young lady in question, who, however, by this time had taken care to disappear, her conscience not being perfectly easy on the subject of her late behaviour. ‘Where has she gone?’ continued Eleanor. ‘She should have interpreted for you, Mr. Marshall—she is quite able to do so.’

‘I have no doubt of it,’ said Mr. Marshall dryly; ‘but she hardly seemed inclined to exert herself for my benefit. She appears a very merry young lady.’

Eleanor looked perplexed and anxious; but the mention of Georgie’s name had caught M. Montluc, and he now joined in the conversation, to the extent at least of explaining to Eleanor the particulars of the stranger’s peculiar reception, and satisfying his own curiosity as to his identity with Mrs. Urquhart’s friend.

‘It was very naughty of Georgie to behave as M. Montluc tells me she did,’ said Eleanor, turning again to Mr. Marshall; ‘but I do trust you will forgive her,’ she added appealingly; ‘she is such a dear child really, only thoughtless, and perhaps a little malicious.’

‘Malicious!’ repeated the Englishman, in surprise at so harsh an epithet proceeding from such gentle lips; ‘that is a serious charge, my dear Miss Urquhart. I should be sorry to think the daughter of my old friend had shown a bad disposition at so early an age.’

‘A bad disposition, Mr. Marshall! O no, you do not understand. Georgie is sweetness itself in her heart. I must have said what I did not mean,’ returned poor Eleanor, her pale cheeks reddening again with annoyance. Then a sudden light broke on her, and she began to laugh at herself. ‘I see how it is,’ she explained; ‘it is my stupid mistake. *Mischievous* I mean; not *malicious*. You see, it is several years now since we have spoken English, except just among ourselves, mother and Georgie and I. What strange people we must seem to you, Mr. Marshall! But pray tell me how it comes that you have arrived so suddenly? You got my mother’s

letter; but that is now some weeks ago, and we have not heard from you. We began to fear you were ill.'

'I was away from home on business, and moving about a good deal from one place to another, when Mrs. Urquhart's letter reached Easterton,' replied Mr. Marshall; 'so there was great delay in my receiving it. From its tone I feared—I feared,' he went on hesitatingly, 'that there was no time to be lost, her health being so—so—'

He stopped, at a loss how to put in words the truth, possibly as yet unknown to the girl before him. But she answered calmly:

'So you came yourself, instead of writing. It was very good and kind; and it is true, there is no time to be lost. I know it,' she whispered; and the look deep down in her eyes touched the undemonstrative but not unkindly lawyer far more than any obtrusive expression of grief; 'I know it, and have known it for a long time; but Georgie does not. Poor Georgie! I will send her back to make friends, Mr. Marshall, while I go to prepare mamma to see you.'

'If Miss Georgie has not done so already,' suggested Mr. Marshall; thinking to himself, as he said so, 'It would be just like the little torment to

frighten her mother into a fit by telling her suddenly.' And Eleanor's confident rejoinder, 'O, no; she would not do so without my leave,' somewhat disappointed him.

She left the room; but though her absence lasted a full quarter of an hour, no Georgie appeared to replace her. Mr. Marshall did not regret it, though he had no alternative left but to respond to the persevering civility of Monsieur Montluc, by floundering about again in an attempt at conversation. He got on better, however, now that he was no longer tortured by the consciousness of Miss Georgie's wicked blue eyes and half-smothered laughter. Adèle Braune too had retired to a distant corner of the room with her companions. So the poor man began to feel rather more at home; and the opportune appearance of the Misses Jennings, in time to translate for him a gracious invitation from Madame Montluc, who just then entered the salon, greatly contributed to his ease of mind.

'Monsieur will give us the pleasure of his company at *gôûter*?' said Madame.

And through the kindly offices of the amiable Miss Jennings, Mr. Marshall was able to signify his acceptance of the proposal.

Not that poor Miss Jennings' French was, strictly speaking, worthy of the name ; but madame was well used to it ; and the whole party appeared to be fraternising better than might have been expected, when Eleanor rejoined them.

'I have told mamma of your arrival, Mr. Marshall,' she said, as that gentleman rose to meet her. 'She is very, very pleased—and relieved too, I can see. She is just having her tea now ; but in a few minutes she hopes you will be so kind as to come up to see her.'

'To-night?' asked Mr. Marshall in some surprise ; adding hastily, 'Not that I should not be most happy to see Mrs. Urquhart to-night ; but I feared it might be rather too much for her, as it is getting late. Would not to-morrow morning be better perhaps, after the night's rest ? I am not very hard pressed for time. I have arranged to stay a few days at Rochette—longer, indeed, if I find it necessary.'

'Thank you very much,' answered Eleanor. 'I think mamma would like just to see you for a minute to-night—just to shake hands and thank you herself. And to-morrow I hope she will be able for a good long talk with you. But not in the morning, please. It is her worst time ; for she has such restless

nights. By the afternoon she is generally pretty well and fresh for an hour or two. They tell me it is always so in an illness of this kind. But perhaps you have not seen much of this sort of suffering,' she added simply, as she glanced up again in his face with the appealing yet resigned expression in her eyes that gave her new friend a queer feeling, that he would have found hard to define had he been the sort of man to analyse his sensations.

'No,' he said gently; 'I am not very experienced in illness of any kind. I am a bachelor, you know, Miss Urquhart, and I have lived very much alone. It must be very trying to watch your poor mother's sufferings. Still, I trust she is a little better than when she wrote to me.'

'I do not think so,' the girl replied slowly; 'no, I do not think she is any better at all. Indeed, I sometimes fear—'

But here she hesitated; and the pause was broken by an inquiry from Madame Montluc, which it devolved on Eleanor to translate, as to which of the two hotels in Rochette 'Monsieur Maréchale' had honoured with his patronage, and strong recommendations of the Hôtel de Gand versus its rival 'de France.' The Englishman fortunately had taken

up his abode at the former; but madame's felicitations on his good fortune in having done so were interrupted by a summons to the family *goûter*, which she had hospitably invited the stranger to join.

The meal was served in the *salle-à-manger*, a long bare room, with but the chilliest of resemblances to that ideal of comfort—an English dining - room. But though the room was bare, the walls pictureless, the windows deficient in drapery, the *table*, at least, could not be complained of. Madame had no idea of stinting her inmates either in the quantity or quality of their food; and Mr. Marshall, in the post of honour at his hostess's right hand, was fain to confess to himself, at the close of the repast, that he had seldom made a heartier; notwithstanding the fact, so embarrassing to a gentleman of his age and condition, that, with the exception of his host and himself, the party consisted entirely of ladies, and single ladies moreover, if we exclude Madame and the widowed sister of Monsieur, Madame d'Herbain.

The child Georgie was on her good behaviour throughout the meal, to the extent, at least, of maintaining perfect gravity of demeanour; but she revenged herself, in her small way, on Mr. Marshall

for the scolding, for which she believed she had to thank him, by utterly ignoring his presence, and replying in her glibest French to her sister's well-meant attempts to draw her into a little English conversation with 'Monsieur Nongtongpaw,' as she had mentally dubbed the new arrival. Her resentment, however, was lost on its object; for he found himself very much at home, thanks to the good things Madame heaped on his plate, and the presence on his other hand of Eleanor, exerting herself to her utmost to reward him for his long journey on their behalf. Not that he was a gourmand, poor man, or in the least accustomed to be 'made of' by ladies young or old. His stiff manners and unbending exterior had long ago frightened away all the maidens of Easterton from any attempts on his heart; which says a good deal to any one acquainted with those estimable ladies, and their heroic perseverance in such endeavours. But it is nevertheless true, that, on this first evening of his visit to Rochette, Mr. Marshall found his customary stiffness and reserve of manner melting away in an altogether unprecedented degree. He was vaguely conscious of its being so, and put it down to the genial influences of foreign travel.

'After all,' he said to himself, 'it is a mistake

to shut oneself up at home, as I have been so fond of doing. I really feel the better already for the thorough change of scene, much as I disliked it in anticipation. And no doubt, to see foreigners to advantage, one should visit them in their own countries.'

An interview of a very few minutes was all Mrs. Urquhart felt able for that evening. And Mr. Marshall was relieved that their first meeting should be a short one; for though the very reverse of a demonstrative or impressionable person, there was something strangely touching to him in the sight of the wan and faded face, lightened only by love and anxiety for the children she must soon leave motherless, of her whom he last remembered almost as lovely and blooming as mischievous, golden-haired Georgie.

Promising to be at Le Doux Repos the following day by the hour which Eleanor told him was 'mamma's best time,' the worthy gentleman, after bidding a cordial good-night to his entertainers, set out on his return to the Hôtel de Gand. It was a very cold evening, and the walk of a mile to Rochette rather more than most people would have cared about under the circumstances. But Mr. Marshall, though not

so young as he had been, was not afraid of a little wind and sleet; and Eleanor's sincere and prettily expressed regrets that he should have 'such a cold disagreeable walk' rang softly in his ears all the way to the hotel, and seemed somehow to lessen the annoyances of the little journey.

'Mamma,' said Nelly, as she returned to her mother's room, after saying good-night to her new friend, 'I do not think Mr. Marshall is at all stiff or prosy. I think he is very kind; and I am very sorry I called him a cold-hearted old wretch. I am so very grateful to him for coming; and I really like him very much.'

'*I don't,*' said a small voice from the corner of the room; 'I call him Monsieur Nongtongpaw; and I can't *bear* him!'

CHAPTER III.

A TETE-A-TETE.

'Une chose vous manque—c'est l'esprit.'

LA BRUYÈRE.

'L'usbergo del sentirsi puro.'

DANTE.

NOTWITHSTANDING the fatigues of the preceding day, Mr. Marshall, having a chronic disease of early rising, was up betimes on the morning following his introduction to the inhabitants of Le Doux Repos, and astonished the landlord and *garçons* of the Hôtel de Ghent, by demanding his breakfast considerably sooner than it was ready for him. It came at last, however, and though a very different affair from the orthodox cup of strong tea, ham, and poached eggs, which for many years had formed the staple of the bachelor's morning repast in his dingy little dining-room at Easterton, he managed to do justice to it;

lingered over it indeed, as if loath to part company with the occupation ; for, to tell the truth, poor Mr. Marshall, for all his last night's theories as to the salutary effects of foreign travel, felt himself this morning quite out of his element, not having the faintest idea how to pass the time till the hour at which he was again to present himself at the campagne of Monsieur Montluc.

It was several years since he had left Easterton, save on business—always excepting his two visits to Paris under the convoy of his sister Mrs. Ellison—and the 'whole-holiday' feeling was too unfamiliar to be altogether agreeable to one, the whole current of whose life had run in a certain channel. He wished he could see what was taking place in his office at Easterton—if the new clerk were shaping well, and if old Mr. Nugent had called about any further additions to his latest will. But such wishes are vain ; and well in the present instance, for the lawyer's peace of mind, that it was so ; for at that very moment the young gentleman, figuring in his imagination as the 'new clerk,' was setting off with the greatest equanimity for a day's skating ; and Squire Nugent was storming over *his* breakfast at a note just received from the office at Easterton, in-

forming him of the absence of its chief. Our friend, however, not being of a fanciful turn, and the theory of brain-waves being in those days undeveloped, he was unassailed by greater annoyances than the vaguely disagreeable nothing-to-do sensation, already beginning to attack him.

If only the English letters were delivered in the morning! If he had a *Times*, even the day before yesterday's (one comes to be thankful for small mercies, in the dead of winter, at such out-of-the-world places as Rochette)! If—but it was no good thus tantalising himself. He strolled to the window and back to the table, and then to the window again, and stared out at the desolate Place, lively and picturesque enough, no doubt, in summer, when crowded with *paysannes* in every imaginable costume, and tourists of every nation in still more astonishing variety of attire; but very much the reverse at the present season, when the few people about looked pinched and blue, and the mere idea of the silent fountain's ever playing again gave one the shivers.

Had he any letters to write? Brilliant inspiration! But, on examination, there proved to be no ink in the bottle; so Mr. Marshall rang the bell, devoutly hoping it would be answered by the one

waiter in the hotel who had a right to tie a placard round his neck with the announcement, that *Ici on parle Anglais*. But before the bell had stopped ringing, the man appeared on a different errand. 'A mees,' he informed Mr. Marshall, 'demanded him.'

'A mees?' repeated the gentleman, beginning to think the English-speaking *garçon* a delusion and a snare. 'A mees! I do not understand. Je n'ongtong paw.'

'Yes, sare,' began the waiter; but a quick, clear voice interrupted him.

'It is I, Mr. Marshall,' said the voice; 'I, Nelly—Eleanor I mean. May I come in? I hope you have finished breakfast. I came very early, because I wanted to be sure to find you in. I want to see you alone.' (And, O, how thankful she felt that she *had* come alone, unaccompanied, that is to say, by Georgie, when the sonorous 'Je n'ongtong paw' reached her ears, as she stood in the passage while the waiter announced her!)

'Miss Urquhart!' exclaimed Mr. Marshall in extreme but not altogether disagreeable surprise, mingled, however, with some anxiety as to the reason of this unexpected visit. He was too sensible to

think of himself as in the position of a *young* man, and his profession had more than once led to his being confidentially consulted by clients both youthful and pretty of the opposite sex. Still the perfect composure with which Eleanor walked into the room in response to his hasty 'Pray come in,' struck him curiously, even in the hurry of the moment, as not exactly the sort of thing an Easterton young lady would have done—at least not without a tremendous amount of flutter and fuss in the way of excuse and explanation. And his experience of young-ladyhood had not extended far beyond Easterton circles.

'I trust there is nothing wrong? Your mother is no worse?' he began to say; but a glance at his visitor's calm though grave face reassured him before the inquiry was put in words.

'It is excessively cold this morning, is it not?' observed Eleanor quietly, as she seated herself on the chair Mr. Marshall instinctively drew forward. 'I fear you will feel it even more than we do, for the winter here is much more severe than in England. I want to have a talk with you before you see mamma, Mr. Marshall, if you will be so kind as spare me the time. Perhaps,' she added, glancing out of the win-

dow as she spoke—‘perhaps you would come out for a walk with me, and we can talk as we go? I do not often get the chance of a walk now; and it is fine, though cold. I can show you a very pretty way through the woods, that brings us out near home.’

‘I should be delighted,’ replied Mr. Marshall, to whom the idea of a walk was considerably more agreeable than that of a tête-à-tête in the hotel, with all the chattering, gossiping waiters about. ‘I suppose there is no fear of Mrs. Urquhart missing you for an hour or so?’

‘O no,’ said Eleanor; ‘I arranged that with Madame. She is always very kind, and when she found I was anxious to see you, she promised to sit with mamma, if she wakes before I return; though it is probable she may sleep some time, for we had a bad night.’

Mr. Marshall looked at her more closely before he spoke again: the young face seemed even thinner and whiter than the candle-light had shown it the night before; the gray eyes were looking down at the moment, but there were dark circles round them, telling their own tale even to a less interested observer. A sudden rush of pity, half paternal, half respectful, for the girl, so child-like yet so womanly,

came over the lawyer, little used as he was to sudden sensations of any kind.

But when he spoke it was in his ordinary commonplace tone, and with a slight increase of his formal manner.

‘I trust,’ he said, ‘your mother was not disturbed for the night by my seeing her so late.’

‘O, dear, no!’ said Miss Urquhart heartily. ‘On the contrary, the thought of your being here is the greatest possible relief to her mind. M. Montluc says so, and for our sakes, too, he is so glad you have come. You see, we do seem strangely lonely and friendless, though I daresay there are many still more so in the world. But had we not better set off on our walk, Mr. Marshall? And—O, by the bye, Madame told me to ask you, if you walk back to Le Doux Repos with me, to come in and have dinner there. We dine early, you know—at one o’clock; it would be like luncheon to you, and then mamma would be ready to see you afterwards.’

‘Thank you,’ said Mr. Marshall, ‘Madame’ (with a strong accent on the second syllable) ‘Montluc is very kind;’ and taking up his hat as he spoke, he added, ‘Shall we start on our ramble then, Miss Urquhart?’

Eleanor did not speak for some minutes after they left the hotel, and Mr. Marshall began to wonder what, after all, she had to say to him. He made two or three not strikingly original observations on the weather, the bad paving of the town, &c.; to which she replied gently and promptly, but only in monosyllables. Her companion began to grow nervous, but no 'happy thought' occurred to him wherewith to open the impending conversation. Suddenly a new idea struck him as the most probable explanation of the girl's hesitation. Could she be about to make him her confidant in some absurd love-affair, which her mother, ill as she was, had had the sense to oppose? For that it could be worthy of anything but opposition never crossed his imagination, seeing that the hero of it could be no other than some 'little jackanapes of a Frenchman.' At the bare supposition, Mr. Marshall's slumbering John Bullism reasserted itself triumphantly, and he began to wish he had stayed at home at Easterton, and replied to Mrs. Urquhart's appeal by letter instead of in person.

'It would be such a pity,' he said to himself. 'Poor Urquhart's daughter—and so like him, too! —and so young, though old enough to fall a prey to some low, designing fellow about here, who may

have heard she has a little money, poor child ! Any way, it is better for me to hear all about it, as I *am* here. I must try and lead the way for her.'

So, for the fifth or sixth time, he cleared his throat impressively, and began,

'You must not hesitate, my dear young lady' (he was doing it very badly, he felt conscious ; the tone was professional all over, but he could not help it) ; 'you must not hesitate,' he began again, 'to—to—to consult or—or—confide in me any matter—any difficulty, I should say, in which you may be placed, even if you may feel it a little awkward to discuss a—a—delicate matter, possibly, with one who at present naturally appears to you in the light of a stranger, notwithstanding his old friendship for your father, and his very sincere interest in your welfare.'

The last half of this speech struck its author as rather successful : he got on much better under the shelter of the third person. There was a moment's pause ; but before Eleanor had time to collect her thoughts to reply, her companion resumed his exhortation.

'I am a great deal older than you, my dear Miss Urquhart, and naturally have a great deal more knowledge and experience of the ways of the world.


I should not hesitate to advise you for what I believed to be the best, even though by so doing I risked incurring your displeasure. Only let me repeat to you, that you have no need to hesitate to tell me the whole of whatever is on your mind, all the particulars of the—the affair—the difficulty.'

Then Eleanor raised her eyes—her clear, honest, child eyes, that (alas for their owner perhaps, some future day, when less kindly scrutiny might read their story !) could not, if they would, have kept a secret, and looked straight up into her companion's face. What she read there puzzled her as much as his words, and a slight flush rose on her pale cheeks as she answered,

'Thank you, Mr. Marshall, you are very kind to speak so—very kind indeed ; but—but—I am afraid I do not quite understand. There was no hesitation on my part. I beg your pardon for being so silent ; but I was thinking over what I had to say to you, so that I should not forget any of it ; and the last minute or two' (here the flush deepened) 'I was wondering to myself, if there would be enough jelly for mamma's luncheon to-morrow, or if I should turn back to the restaurant to order some more. But I must have seemed very rude. I do beg your pardon.'

‘I beg yours,’ was all Mr. Marshall could get out in explanation of his ill-chosen exhortation, ‘for— for so interrupting’ (he had all but said ‘misjudging’) ‘you. But, my dear Miss Urquhart,’ he went on hastily, for not for worlds would he have given her an opportunity of demanding, with that calm voice of hers, her gray eyes fixed on his face, what he *did* mean, ‘I fear you are over anxious. The pressure of all this anxiety and responsibility is falling too heavily on you.’

‘It is not for long,’ she answered gently; ‘in one sense, you know, I cannot be over anxious. I mean, there is no fear of my anxiety leading me to exaggerate it. There is no hope; not the shadow of one. And just for this little while, Mr. Marshall—this last little while, that can never come back again—I *cannot* think of myself, can I?’ she asked appealingly. ‘I know I am not so strong as I used to be; but afterwards I shall be sure to take care of myself, for Georgie’s sake. I shall not need reminding of it. I am sure to do so, for I am only too apt to be over anxious about that part of it—Georgie’s future, I mean; for she will have no one but me. But that was one of the things I wanted to ask Mr. Marshall: not to mind what Monsieur and



Madame say about my wearing myself out. I know they will be speaking about it to you ; for they are always saying, if only there was some friend of mine to speak to about it, they would try to make me give up nursing mamma myself. O, it would kill me to give it up, and it is for a little while only, a very little while.'

The cold air got down into Mr. Marshall's throat, and obliged him to cough once or twice to clear his voice before he answered ; and when he did so, it was by a question.

'But your mother, my dear Miss Eleanor? Is not the anxiety about you bad for *her*? Does she not observe what you tell me your kind friends have noticed—your failing health and strength?'

'O, it's not so bad as that,' replied the girl ; 'I am not ill at all—only tired sometimes, and Monsieur and Madame are rather fussy. And as for mamma, she is quite comfortable about it now. She *was* uneasy ; but now I rest part of every day, which satisfies her. And she understands that I really should get ill, if I was not allowed to do it. O, yes, she is quite comfortable about it now, if only nobody is so naughty as to put it into her head again.'

She glanced up at him half mischievously as she

spoke. It was the first time he had seen any approach to playfulness about her, though, naturally, gleams of fun and humour were no strangers to Eleanor Urquhart. The bright expression, momentary as it was, lit up the pale young face, and brought out its unobtrusive beauty more than one would have thought possible, and Mr. Marshall, though no artist, felt a sudden and pleasant sensation of warmth and colour in the picture before him. If some women knew the charm of rare flashes of playfulness, occasional unexpected smiles and merriment on a background of perfect repose of manner, they would be more chary of their bright looks and 'silvery laughter,' less eager to exhibit their powers of wit and repartee. But unfortunately the women who study such matters would be the last to take lessons in the art of pleasing from a wild-flower of a girl like Nelly Urquhart.

'You may trust me, Miss Urquhart, to say nothing to make your mother uneasy,' said Mr. Marshall gravely.

'Thank you again,' said Eleanor; 'I am glad you have promised me that. It makes it easier for me to say what I want to you. It was just that, indeed, that I had to say. Mamma has been talking to me a great deal lately, Mr. Marshall; and I

want to tell you I quite understand about everything ; so will you please not mind my being so young and inexperienced and all that, you know, and talk to *me* about things instead of to mamma ?’

‘ But how can I avoid talking to Mrs. Urquhart about things ?’ asked poor Mr. Marshall, looking rather bewildered. ‘ She is sure to ask me questions about your affairs and your future. It is indeed solely and entirely for the sake of discussing all with her that I have come from England. She wrote that she wished to consult me. It will seem very strange to her, if I refuse to answer her inquiries, or give her my advice.’

‘ O, you don’t understand what I mean !’ exclaimed Nelly, with a slight touch of impatience in her tone. But checking herself instantly, she added apologetically, ‘ I mean — I must have got into a very stupid way of *not* saying what I mean — what I mean is, will you please not say anything to distress mamma ? *Of course* you must talk to her and answer her questions. She would think there was something dreadful to conceal if you did not. But please make the best of things to her ; even — even if you have to tell some little stories ! There is only one thing I care about in the whole world

just now,' she went on, with the restrained passion sometimes discernible, in the quietest voice—'Georgie even I can't think of just yet in comparison with this thing—and it is, that mamma's last days should be perfectly untroubled. I think they may be so, if you will do what I ask.'

'Tell me still more plainly *what* you ask,' said Mr. Marshall, somewhat stiffly, but not unkindly, 'and I shall then tell you if I can do it. You do not wish me literally to *deceive* your mother as to actual facts—the amount of money, for instance, that will be left for your own and your sister's maintenance? Indeed there could be no use in my attempting to do so, even if my conscience would permit it, for Mrs. Urquhart knows the particulars of her money matters as well as I do myself. They are very simple; besides the temporary income from the pensions, there is a small amount of capital invested at good interest, but still what it gives is very little, very little indeed. But I beg your pardon; young ladies cannot enter into such dry details.'

'*I* can,' said Eleanor stoutly; 'I can and I must. Yes, I know all about it exactly. We shall have about a hundred a year besides the pensions. But it is not that part of it mamma worries herself the

most about. She knows we shall be poor ; but what troubles her is, the thought of where we shall live—who will be our friends—in short, what will become of us. I should have preferred the idea of remaining in Switzerland ; leaving Georgie with Monsieur and Madame, and I myself perhaps getting a situation as governess here. But mother dislikes the idea so much of our staying abroad, that I have given it up. She has some castle in the air about our perhaps meeting with a home together in some very nice family in England, where I could be governess, and teach Georgie with my other pupils. But though I know very little of England, I should fancy such an arrangement would be difficult to make. I have spoken to some of the English young ladies at Le Doux Repos, and all tell me few families would like a governess with a little sister. But I am not afraid about it. Something is sure to offer itself when the time comes. O, it is too bad to think about it at all just now ! If only my dear mother would not distress herself about it ! She fears, too, that I am almost too young to be a governess. But it is not so, is it, Mr. Marshall ?

‘ I think it *is* so, Miss Urquhart,’ answered her companion gravely ; ‘ and on other accounts, on

every account, I should protest against it. It would be almost certain to involve separation from your sister, and I cannot see the necessity of it. You would have enough to live on without it.'

'Yes, I suppose so,' agreed Eleanor; 'but mamma says we should save some money every year, against the time our pensions cease.'

'That is true, certainly,' rejoined Mr. Marshall, thinking, as he said so, that his friend's widow must be a more practical and sensible woman than his previous knowledge of her had led him to imagine; forgetting to take into account the marvellous influence of a dying parent's anxiety for the future of her children, in concentrating and increasing the whole forces of the mind, and developing almost magically the power of prevision; — 'that is true, certainly,' he repeated; 'though it appears to me to be looking a very long way, an unnecessarily long way ahead. Before both pensions lapse (you must excuse me, my dear Miss Urquhart), it is, to say the least, highly probable that—'

'I know what you are going to say,' interrupted the young lady; 'but please don't say it. *That* will not be, you may be quite sure,' she went on, with such astonishing coolness, and so evident an air of

having thoroughly considered this solution of the difficulty from all points of view, that the middle-aged bachelor again began to perplex himself as to whether his ward-to-be was a new and rather astounding development of the 'girl of the period' (though the phrase was not then coined, the type but in its infancy), or a maiden, original perhaps, in a sense his somewhat dull world-dried apprehension could scarcely enter into, but ingenuous and straightforward to a degree that his own innately honest nature could not but appreciate and respect. A maiden of a class rare enough nowadays to make us doubt if ever, save in the golden age, it was otherwise, 'possessed of that undying charm of simplicity so seldom met with, that we come to believe in it as more of a fortunate grace than a common result of essential virtues.'

Not that worthy Mr. Marshall thought all this to himself, good man! He was by no means in the habit of analysing characters of any kind, and most assuredly not those of young ladies. 'Simplicity' would to him, I fear, have been synonymous with 'silliness;' and Eleanor Urquhart he had already discovered was certainly far from *silly*. But still she puzzled him not a little. Out of the world.

as, in the social acceptance of the term, his own life had been, her utter absence of conventionality was to him a new phase of womanhood. He did not altogether like it, but he liked the girl herself; so whatever struck him as opposed to his preconceived ideas on orthodox young ladyhood, he set down to 'that foreign education in an outlandish little place like Rochette.'

'And why should I be quite sure?' he demanded, half inclined to favour her with one of his little stock professional jokes, mild in the extreme, and usually graciously enough received by the Easterton young ladies, who now and then required his assistance in the drawing-up of their marriage settlements, and to whom in such circumstances he could venture slightly to unbend; but a joke nevertheless, which, had Eleanor been at all capable of understanding, she certainly would have disliked. 'Why should I be quite sure of it, Miss Urquhart?'

'Because,' she answered gravely and with no shadow of annoyance at the question, 'I have said to myself, I will not marry any one who would not also give a home to Georgie. Few men, I am told, would like this; so, till Georgie marries, I will devote myself to her alone, and remain beside her. Does not

my resolution appear to you a wise and reasonable one, Mr. Marshall?' she asked quaintly, raising her eyes to his face with the thoughtful appealing expression peculiar to herself.

It was, to say the least, an unusual question to be put by a young girl to an unmarried man of *any* age, with whom her actual acquaintance was of the slightest; but there was something infectious in her calm, unembarrassed, perfectly natural manner of discussing the subject; and Mr. Marshall, though the very last human being one would have picked out as likely to be confided in by a woman on any delicate or personal matter, was unconsciously growing accustomed to his new position; and terrible as such a conversation would have appeared to him in anticipation, the reality — a fair young face, and grave sweet eyes glancing up trustfully into his — was by no means a disagreeable experience. Though far from an unkindly or selfish man, his nature was yet cold, slow, self-contained, and as a rule unimpressionable. There had been little warmth or colour in his life, but he had missed neither. Perhaps the nearest approach to romance in his history had been his old friendship for Frank Urquhart, Eleanor's father, the root of which neither long years of sepa-

ration nor death itself had had power to kill ; for, like most slow natures, Mr. Marshall was eminently adhesive. Whatever romance, in the more tender meaning of the word, was to come home to him before he died, sprang into existence, all unconsciously to himself, that winter morning, walking through the woods at Rochette, side by side with his old friend's daughter, whose ways and manners struck him as strangely unlike those of the few women with whom he had ever been brought into familiar intercourse, but whose gray eyes, as she looked up into his face, he felt to be very sweet.

Not much of a ' story,' I daresay ; and the hero thereof an ordinary-looking man of forty-five ! But for all that, William Marshall's little bit of romance was genuine, so far as it went ; and perhaps all the more pathetic in that it was capable of going no farther.

Eleanor's question was not at once replied to. Then said her companion slowly, and as if considering the bearing of his words as he uttered them :

' Yes, Miss Urquhart ; under the circumstances you name, your resolution is certainly a praiseworthy one. Still, I can see no reason at present for your making any resolution on the subject at all. You

are so young ; circumstances may change altogether ; it is even possible that your—your—deserting your maiden name' (with a slight return of the professionally jocular tone) ' might prove to be for your sister's benefit, as well as, let us hope, for your own happiness. But I would not advise you to perplex yourself with such contingencies at present.'

' I daresay it seems silly,' said Eleanor deprecatingly ; ' but you see that is my way, Mr. Marshall. I cannot help thinking of all sorts of possibilities, remote ones even, and trying to arrange them all beforehand, or rather my conduct with relation to them. I like to feel forearmed—*dressée pour le combat*. O, I beg your pardon for—But never mind ; I am sure you understand me.'

Mr. Marshall by no means understood her, even before the lapse into the obnoxious language ; but he did not say so. Perhaps he had not given full attention to her last words, or had been pursuing a train of thought of his own. In a minute or two he observed :

' It may appear impertinent of me to say so ; but I cannot but think it would be a pity for any young lady to enter life, as I may say, with any prejudice against marriage.'

‘O, but I have no prejudice against it at all!’ exclaimed Eleanor with the utmost *naïveté*; ‘it is only for leaving Georgie. I think it would be very nice indeed to be married; I should of all things enjoy housekeeping. I was *demoiselle d’honneur*—marriage—no, no, *bridesmaid*, I mean—to Pauline D’Herbain, last summer; and then I went to stay a week with her in her little house. Ah, it was delightful! I was never so happy in my life—arranging all the rooms to look pretty, and marketing in the morning, Prejudice! O no! Where one can marry with one’s own approval, and that of one’s friends, marriage must be charming.’

‘Provided the gentleman is so,’ suggested Mr. Marshall smilingly; for while agreeably surprised by the revelation of Miss Urquhart’s housewifely tastes, his English notions—matter-of-fact and unsentimental as he was—were rather startled by her calm ignoring of the chief actor in the drama. ‘Your friend’s husband is, I suppose, a young man possessing every desirable qualification?’

‘O yes,’ said Nelly; ‘he is very nice—very amiable indeed. He is not very young; but then Pauline says he is all the more kind. He is a professor at the college. They are very happy, and the house is

a perfect bijou. It is delightful to arrange a house like that. But, O, how can I go on chattering so thoughtlessly? No pleasure of that kind could ever be much pleasure to me.'

'Why so?' asked Mr. Marshall.


'Because—O, you know why,' she said in a low tone. 'One of Pauline's best pleasures was to show her pretty house to her kind mother, and to hear her praises of her good management. Madame D'Herbain often goes to spend a few days with her daughter, and always comes back looking as fresh as a rose. Never was any one happier than Pauline! she says. All the D'Herbains have the kindest hearts; they are like M. Montluc. Pauline is very fortunate. I am different; I can never again have a light heart like hers.'

'Ah!' was Mr. Marshall's only reply; but to himself he whispered, 'Poor child!'

In a minute or two he resumed: 'Then, Miss Urquhart, so far as I understand, you wish me, in speaking to your mother, to say all I can to cheer and soothe her about your future arrangements. But I suppose I need not enter into particulars. It will satisfy her, will it not, if I undertake to do all in my power to hit upon some desirable arrangement, when—when it is necessary to do so? Some general

assurance of this kind will satisfy her, will it not? It would be difficult, during the few days of my stay here, to see the details of any scheme that may occur to me.'

'I know that,' returned Eleanor thoughtfully; but I *fear*, Mr. Marshall, mamma will hardly be satisfied with general assurances of that kind. Since she has been ill, her anxiety for us has made her more practical and definite about our future than I have ever known her about anything before. Poor dear mother! So often she repeats: "If only I could *see* in imagination the home you will have together, I could die happy." No, Mr. Marshall; I must ask you to do even more than soothe with general assurances of your kindness. I said, you know, it might be even necessary for you to tell some little stories—some good little stories'—here the gray eyes peeped up again, half playfully, half defiantly; but Mr. Marshall's face was grave—'such as, for instance, that you think some nice family can be found for us to live with, as she has planned. Please say this in as sanguine a tone as possible, whether you feel so or not. Indeed, I would beg you to pledge yourself to anything, possible or impossible, to make her feel happy about us. And'—here the fair face flushed,



and the voice took a firm resolute ring, with perhaps the least touch of haughtiness in its under-tone—‘I, on my part, will pledge myself in no wise to hold you bound by anything you may in your goodness promise for the sake of making her deathbed happy. I have no shadow of fear about our future. We are sure to get on somehow; and O, Mr. Marshall, if you were to forget all about Georgie and me, and never help us in any way, I should all the same thank and bless you all my life for making my darling’s last days peaceful.’

He did not answer. They walked on silently for some moments. Nelly grew uncomfortable, and spoke again.

‘I do hope you are not vexed with me for anything I have said, Mr. Marshall,’ she asked meekly. ‘You did not think me wicked for saying I wished you would even tell a few stories?’

Mr. Marshall cleared his throat.

‘Vexed, my dear young lady! far from it. I think I may say I thoroughly appreciate the excellence of your motives. My only reason for not replying more quickly was, that I was thinking it over—weighing your words, I may say. I quite agree with you as to the extreme desirability of freeing Mrs.

Urquhart's mind from all anxiety; and one promise I can certainly make you—make and keep—and that is, *I will do my best*. I should not like to mislead even an invalid. But do not think I intend any reflection on what you said, Miss Urquhart; your education—ahem! The fact is, we stay-at-home Englishmen come to have perhaps stricter ideas on some subjects than are to be met with abroad. But—'

'But what, please?' asked Eleanor rather impatiently.

For she herself had no lack of words when she had anything to say, and she spoke so clearly and unhesitatingly, that a comparatively short observation of her companion's took twice as long, in his slow pompous tone, as the lengthiest of her explanations.

'But,' he proceeded as deliberately as before, 'I think—I hope—though I am far from sure, that I may be able to relieve Mrs. Urquhart's mind of its very natural anxiety, without—without—in short, without "telling any stories," as you express it, Miss Urquhart. Any way, I repeat, I wish you to rest assured I will do my best.'

'Thank you,' said Eleanor warmly; 'thank you very much.' And as she spoke, in her pretty frank way, she held out her hand—a little hand, a thin

little hand, though cased in a good thick glove to defy the cold. Tiny enough it felt, anyhow, to Mr. Marshall, as, yielding in an unprecedented way to the moment's pleasant impulse, he held it lingeringly in his substantial grasp. Involuntarily they stopped in their walk. By now they had nearly reached the edge of the wood; the trees were less densely planted, and a faint ray of wintry sunshine fell on their path, leading out now into the open meadows, across which lay the garden-wall of Le Doux Repos. All was white—snow, snow, as far as the eye could reach, white, and very still.

‘The wind has quite fallen again,’ said Eleanor; and then she added: ‘It is so very pretty here in summer, Mr. Marshall.’

‘So I should imagine,’ he replied; ‘but what is that smoke rising down there among the trees, Miss Urquhart? What a strange resinous smell comes with it!’

‘Don’t you think it is a delicious smell?’ questioned the girl; ‘*fragrance* I should call it. It is the charcoal-burners—I am so fond of it!’

‘It is a—a—peculiar smell,’ repeated Mr. Marshall, snuffing the air; ‘ye-es, I rather think I like it.’

‘I think it delicious,’ said Nelly again; ‘it makes me think of all sorts of nice things—Black-Forest fairy tales, pine-woods in summer—O, all manner of queer things!’

Mr. Marshall snuffed again, and half unconsciously tried to like it as she did. Suddenly—so unaccustomed was he to be run away with by unpractical interests of any kind—the thought struck him that it must be getting late. He drew out his watch in his deliberate way.

‘Miss Urquhart,’ he said, ‘our time is nearly up.’

Nelly turned away from the direction she had been gazing in, and moved on with a slight sigh.

‘What a nice walk we have had!’ she exclaimed; ‘and, O, I do so wish I could put some of that pine-wood essence in a scent-bottle, and carry it away with me, if—if we do leave Switzerland!’

The words struck Mr. Marshall, unimaginative as he was, and left an undefinable impression. Never afterwards did the winter smell of burning wood—though it might not be the fragrant pine—reach him without that little scene recurring to his memory,—girlish Nelly gazing at the snow-laden trees, and uttering her childish plaintive little wish.

Possibly there was more romance latent in the

Easterton lawyer's nature than was suspected by himself or others. The thickness of the outer prosaic crust is far from a safe guide in the judgment of such characters. There comes before me the portrait of the confectioner-lover in the story of *Faustine*, who so curiously jumbles prose and poetry, trade and romance, in his quaint description of his first experience of an interest surpassing that of *biscuits glacés* and *fruits confits*.

'En m'en allant,' says Monsieur Alexandre, when telling of his first visit to his lady-love, and the souvenir he preserved of it, 'je bris un brin de ce réséda qui est encore là, sur la fenêtre ; cette pauvre petite fleur, je l'ai conservé comme une relique ; elle est dans mon porte-feuille, avec les billets de banque.'

CHAPTER IV.

MR. MARSHALL DOES HIS BEST.

‘Therewithal
He kiss’d her; and from out the hall
She pass’d, not shamefaced or afraid
Of what might happen, though, indeed,
Her heart of no man’s heart had need
To make her happy, as she thought.

* * * * *

Her lips had trembled with no kiss,
Wherewith love slayeth fear and shame;
Her gray eyes, conscious of no blame,
Beheld unmoved the eyes of men;
Her hearing grew no dimmer when
Some unused footstep she might hear.’

The Man born to be King.

GEORGIE flew out to meet them, as they entered the long stone passage where Mr. Marshall had stood waiting the night before.

‘O, Nelly,’ she exclaimed, ‘I am so glad you have come! Mamma has just wakened, and is asking for you; but she has had a beautiful sleep.’

‘I am so glad,’ said Eleanor, transformed in an instant to the thoughtful daughter, the womanly elder sister; ‘I am so glad!’ And she stooped to kiss the eager lips, and stroke back lovingly the flossy golden hair. ‘We have had such a nice walk through the woods, and I feel so refreshed! But, Georgie dear,’ she exclaimed, suddenly recollecting herself, ‘don’t you see Mr. Marshall? You are forgetting to wish him good-morning.’

‘Bon jour, Monsieur Nontongpaw,’ quoth Miss Georgie instantly, looking up in the gentleman’s face with a dangerous solemnity in her great blue eyes, and making him, as she spoke, a curious little *révérence*, half bow, half curtsy, prim yet graceful, which she had several times practised with success, when determined to make Monsieur Montluc laugh in the middle of one of his mild lectures on some mischievous escapade. A slight frown of annoyance clouded Eleanor’s fair face; but before Mr. Marshall had time in any way to respond to his little torment’s questionable greeting, that small person found herself calmly turned round by her sister’s firm though gentle hands, and the words, ‘Georgie, go upstairs to your own room, and wait till I come to you,’ were whispered in a tone she dared not disobey.


‘Will you be so good as come into the *salon*?’ then said Miss Urquhart courteously, as she turned again to Mr. Marshall; ‘and I will let Monsieur know you are here. I must run up to mamma now; but Monsieur said he was sure he could manage a little English conversation, if you and he were alone.’

‘Thank you,’ said her companion cordially, by way of showing he was above visiting on *her* the child’s small impertinence, which by this time was dawning on him as deliberately intended. ‘Thank you, Miss Urquhart; I shall do very well, I have no doubt.’

So Eleanor made him over to the care of the hospitable pastor till dinner-time, while she ran up to scold Georgie, and to amuse her mother with an account of her walk.

The latter was the more easily accomplished of her tasks.

‘What a nice colour you have got on your cheeks, my darling!’ exclaimed Mrs. Urquhart as the girl entered the room. ‘I am so glad you have had a walk; and I have not missed you in the least. That dear child Georgie has been sitting watching beside me like a mouse, ready to call Madame if I woke.’



It was not easy to scold the delinquent after this, but it must be done.

‘I shall be back immediately, mamma,’ said Nelly, as she kissed her; ‘I am only going to take off my bonnet.’

‘Just a moment first,’ said her mother. ‘I am so very anxious to know how you got on with Mr. Marshall, and if you like him?’

‘Very much indeed, mother,’ answered Eleanor heartily; ‘nothing could be kinder than his whole manner and way of speaking. For an Englishman’—as if she had had the widest experience of that nation and every other—‘I really do not find him stiff or prim at all.’

Mrs. Urquhart smiled slightly; but she was far too much pleased with Nelly’s satisfactory reply to make fun of her little assumption of wisdom.

‘He must surely have improved,’ she said consideringly; ‘or else, dear, you have a happier knack of drawing him out than I had when I knew him years ago. I always respected and liked him of course, for your father’s sake; and now I have more reason than ever to do so. But I did think him terribly stiff and formal. I am so very glad—so glad and relieved you really like him, Nelly.’

'I do really,' repeated Eleanor. She spoke with sincerity; but had Mr. Marshall been ten times more obnoxious to her than any one she had ever met, I question much if she could have found it in her heart to express her feelings of dislike to the poor mother, whose face brightened so piteously at the thought that, after all, her darlings would not be left quite friendless in the world.

Eleanor found Georgie awaiting her obediently enough in their bedroom. The child was staring out of the window at the snow, but turned towards her sister on hearing her enter. Nelly's 'scolding,' no very terrible affair, she received with a manner submissive, but hardly penitent. Her young monitor felt baffled.

'I don't understand you, Georgie,' she said at last; 'no one knows better than you how to behave nicely if you choose. You must feel you were very rude to Mr. Marshall. Think how it would grieve mamma if she knew it.'

'I don't want to grieve mamma,' returned the child; 'but I don't like Monsieur Nong—Mr. Marshall I mean, and I can't help making fun of people I don't like. I didn't like Adèle for a long time, and I always made fun of her then.'

‘There is nothing to be proud of in that,’ replied Eleanor, rather taken aback by the extraordinary logic of Miss Georgie’s defence. ‘You like Adèle now, which is more to the purpose, as it gives some hope you may come to like Mr. Marshall.’

‘No, I sha’n’t,’ said Georgie firmly, though not defiantly, ‘*never!*’

Eleanor sighed.

‘It is very unfortunate,’ she murmured, more to herself than to her little companion, ‘very unfortunate; just when I have been doing everything in my power. O Georgie, you don’t know how you are adding to my troubles!’

There was a pause. Eleanor sat still thinking, with a distressed look on her face, white enough now, for the transient bloom left by the fresh air and exercise had already faded.

‘Nelly,’ said Georgie in a softened tone.

‘Well, Georgie?’

‘I don’t want to add to your troubles, Nelly, I don’t indeed,’ said the child; ‘I will try, I promise, to behave as you like to Mr. Marshall, even though I don’t like him.’

This sounded more hopeful, and Eleanor was not slow to take advantage of it.

‘I am glad to hear you say you will behave properly to Mr. Marshall, though that is the very least to be expected of a little girl like you to any one so much older, and a friend of mamma’s too. I shall not be pleased with you till you promise to get over this silly fancy; and I cannot think what put it in your head. Why should you dislike him? You know he has been a very kind friend to us.’

‘But he is old and ugly, and he can’t speak French, and he calls me “Miss Georgie,”’ said the child with a toss of her golden head; ‘and—and—’

‘Yes,’ said Nelly severely; ‘you may well say ‘and—and—’’

‘At Kilve there is no weather-cock,
And that’s the reason why,’

she might have quoted, had she been better versed in the poets of her native land. Her good sense, however, prevented her pressing for a reason, where she believed none worthy of the name existed; and she turned from her sister, and began to take off her bonnet and wraps.

But to some extent she did Georgie injustice. The child fidgeted about uneasily for a few minutes; and then again there came a timid hesitating, ‘Nelly.’

‘Well, Georgie?’ said Eleanor for the second time.

‘I *could* give a better reason, if I chose,’ said the little girl; ‘only I don’t want you to be more vexed with me; and you would be, wouldn’t you?’

‘How can I possibly tell till I know what it is? But if you are afraid it would vex me, perhaps you had better not say it,’ replied Eleanor in a ‘Laura,’ in ‘Rosamond,’ tone, which would have aggravated Georgie exceedingly, had she not been considerably more in earnest than was usual with her.

‘You would not be vexed with *me*,’ returned the child, meekly but mysteriously; ‘it is something I *heard*. Last night I hadn’t any real reason for not liking Mr. Marshall; I only laughed because I could not help it, and I did mean to be good to-day, though I said I could not bear him, to tease you. But this morning I heard something that makes me hate him, if it is true. O, Nelly, do say it isn’t true!’

‘*What* isn’t true? Really, Georgie, you will send me out of my wits!’ exclaimed Eleanor, her patience very nearly exhausted. ‘Tell me what you mean, and do be quick.’

‘Well,’ proceeded Georgie, ‘it was this morning, just after you went out. I was in the *salon*, looking for one of the fairy-books on the lowest shelf of the bookcase, to take up to read while I was watching by

mamma ; and the Miss Jennings came into the room talking to each other rather low. There was nobody else there, and they did not see me, I was stooping down so. They were speaking about you ; for I heard one say “ Eleanor Urquhart ”—and they have no right to call you that ; they always say Miss Urquhart to your face, — and then the other said something about “ Not a bad marriage ? I should think not, indeed. Considering all, far better than she could expect.” Then Miss Frances Jennings said something else, but I could not hear, her voice is so weak ; and Miss Jennings said again, “ Far better than she could expect. Not pretty, no money to speak of. Still I am glad for her to be settled, poor thing ! and it must be a relief to the mother. No wonder Miss Nelly looked in better spirits this morning ” (they called you “ Miss Nelly,” Nelly). “ I wonder how soon it will be proper for us to wish her joy as the future Mrs. Marshall ? ”

Georgie made a moment’s impressive pause after reaching the awful climax of her story, but Nelly said nothing ; so the child went on.

‘ When they said *that*, Nelly, I knew what they meant ; before, I did not understand. I listened to hear if they were going to say any more, but some-

body came into the room, and they began to talk of something else ; so I slipped out, and they never saw me. You are not to say it was naughty to listen, Nelly. It was not my fault, and I could not have helped listening even if it was naughty, when they spoke of you. But it can't be true ; Nelly, tell me it can't be true. You wouldn't marry that horrible, horrible man, and go away and leave mamma and me ? O, Nelly, say you won't !' And Georgie clasped her hands round her sister's neck, and squeezed her tight in an ecstasy of entreaty.

Nelly did not answer immediately ; and when she did, her words were hardly what the child expected.

'If I promise you, Georgie,' she said, 'never, as long as I live, of my own free will to leave you, will you on your part promise me to do your best to get over this silly, unreasonable dislike of yours, which you must see has caused a great deal of unnecessary trouble ?'

'O yes, yes,' exclaimed the child, hugging her sister harder than ever ; 'I would not be naughty to Mr. Marshall ; I would try to think him kind and nice, if I thought you would never, never let him take you away from mamma and me.'

'I would let *nobody* do that, Georgie,' said Elea-

nor impressively ; ' Mr. Marshall nor any one else. Surely, dear, you know, that besides mamma there is no one in the world that I love, or ever could love, as I do you, my little sister.'

Tears of repentance were by this time plentifully escaping from the blue eyes, lately so stubborn and defiant in expression. Charging her to tell no one else of the highly indiscreet remarks she had overheard, Nelly dismissed the small offender for a run in the garden with good-humoured Adèle, whose kindly nature could, she knew by previous experience, be trusted to annoy Georgie by no remarks or inquiries concerning her red eyes and flushed cheeks. Then Eleanor returned to her mother's room and remained beside her quietly, talking little, but thinking a good deal, till the bell summoned all the inhabitants of Le Doux Repos to the early dinner, at which, according to the invitation of the morning, Mr. Marshall was again a guest. She was graver throughout the meal than she had been the preceding evening ; graver, and though perfectly unembarrassed, somewhat preoccupied.

' I trust our walk has not over-fatigued you, Miss Urquhart ?' inquired Mr. Marshall ; and glancing up to reply, Eleanor's quick eyes perceived a slight, a

very slight smile of mysterious meaning pass from one Miss Jennings to the other. But she hardly felt annoyed, and answered simply, that far from fatiguing, it had greatly refreshed her.

‘What a curious girl she is!’ whispered one of the maiden sisters to the other, as they left the dining-room. ‘An English girl (for I cannot look upon these Urquharts as really English)—that is to say, an English girl of any refinement—would have blushed up to the ears half-a-dozen times during dinner in her circumstances; and there she sits as cool as can be! I must say I like to see girls *natural*.’

‘But,’ suggested the milder-spirited and less-imaginative Miss Frances, ‘perhaps, after all, there is nothing in it, Susannah?’

‘Nonsense, child!’ retorted her sister; ‘if there isn’t something in it already, there’s just going to be. Did you ever know me wrong in such cases? Has any one ever proposed to either you or me, or any one in our neighbourhood, without my saying it beforehand?’

Miss Frances murmured meekly, ‘No, never.’ And in one sense she was right; for just as a systematic storyteller must now and then speak the truth by accident, so it came to pass with the predictions of

Miss Jennings. Considering that she announced the matrimonial intentions of *every* single gentleman of her acquaintance towards, in turn, *every* single lady similarly honoured, it naturally followed that all *bonâ fide* 'proposals' and subsequent marriages had, at one time or other, been the subjects of her special prognostication.

Mr. Marshall's interview with Mrs. Urquhart was a long one. He left the house immediately it was over, saying he would hardly have time to write his letters at the hotel before post-time, and Eleanor only saw him for a moment to wish him good-evening. Then she hastened up to her mother, half afraid of finding her worn out with the fatigue of so much talking. But Mrs. Urquhart received her cheerfully, declaring she had not felt so well and fresh for a long time.

'Then you had a nice talk with Mr. Marshall?' said Eleanor; 'and he made you feel comfortable, darling, did he?'

'He was very kind,' replied Mrs. Urquhart, with a slight and unusual evasion of the spirit of Eleanor's question, which that young lady was acute enough to perceive, 'very kind indeed. I am beginning to think I have done him injustice by judging him so much

by his cold manner and stiff way of writing. But, Nelly dear, his suggestions have given me a great deal to think of; and I think, dear, I had better not talk much more to-night. I will tell you everything to-morrow, after I have thought it all—I mean, after I have seen Mr. Marshall again.'

'Then you are to see him again to-morrow?' said Nelly. 'Well, you must not let him tire you, or I shall be very angry with him.' And as she stooped to kiss her mother's soft cheek, she added anxiously, noticing a faint pink flush of unusual excitement on the invalid's pale face, 'I don't want you to tell me any more, only just this one thing. Whatever it was Mr. Marshall said, it was nothing to distress or trouble you—to add to your anxiety in any way?'

'O dear, no, *truly* no,' replied Mrs. Urquhart eagerly. 'I assure you, Nelly, I have never felt more hopeful about your future and Georgie's, than since I have had this talk with Mr. Marshall. It has given me a good deal to think about, as I told you, but not to make me unhappy. My child, my child, I am only anxious for your happiness!'

'I know that, dearest mother, and *whatever* you advise, I will promise to do. No happiness or blessing of any kind would follow me if I did otherwise.'

There was a few minutes' silence. Then Mrs. Urquhart said suddenly :

'I think Mr. Marshall admires you very much, Nelly. He says you are so like your father.'

Eleanor smiled quietly. 'I can't exactly fancy him admiring anybody,' she said; 'but I am quite content if he likes me. I suppose I must be like my father, for I am certainly not like you. Georgie has got all the beauty.'

'Hush, Nelly,' said her mother reprovingly; 'your father was a remarkably fine-looking man.'

'All the same, I need not be a fine-looking woman, though I am like him,' maintained Eleanor. 'But, mother, you are going on talking, after all. I shall go and fetch a book, and not let you speak another word.'

As the girl left the room, Mrs. Urquhart congratulated herself on the diplomatic way in which, according to Mr. Marshall's special request, she had managed to evade Nelly's cross-questioning, and steered clear of betraying the particulars of the afternoon's conversation. Poor little woman! At that moment Eleanor was saying to herself, 'I see it all. I know what is before me;' and already, as was her habit, beginning to make the best, in her own mind, of the inevitable, or what to her, under the circum-

stances, appeared to be so. 'Making the best' is almost too strong an expression in this case for the process of familiarising herself with the details of the suspected scheme, which she half unconsciously set to work at; for she by no means felt herself a martyr, or lay awake all night groaning over the sacrifice she was willing to make of herself for the sake of others. She was conscious of no sacrifice at all; and in her untroubled, unawakened innocence, she had but one misgiving—the fear that Georgie's prejudice might blind her to the benefit she was certain to derive from her sister's early 'settlement in life.'

'But I must try to make her see it, if—if it really comes to pass,' decided Eleanor at the close of her cogitations, half inclined to laugh at the absurdity of Georgie herself, thanks to the observations of Miss Jennings, having actually been the first to put the idea into her head. For notwithstanding her experience of the discreet and unromantic love-making of Pauline Delbart's elderly professor, it really would never, but for her little sister's treachery, have entered Nelly's head to think of Mr. Marshall's possibly occupying a similar position towards herself. And on the whole, it was very

well for the success of the lawyer's cause, that, unsuspected by any one, she had an extra twenty-four hours in which to think it over and grow accustomed to the idea.

She did not trouble herself much with unselfish meditations on the desirability of the scheme from Mr. Marshall's point of view ; and though unusually free from vanity or self-conceit, she did not somehow feel surprised at the sudden impression she had made on him.

'He likes me for my father's sake, I suppose,' she thought to herself. 'Well, he is much older and wiser than I, and he told me to-day he hoped I would trust to his greater experience ; though certainly I did not think of *this* ! And after all, mamma and he are my best advisers. I can't be wrong if I do as they wish ;' and so thinking, she to some extent dismissed the subject from her mind.

Miss Jennings was rather disconcerted by the non-appearance of Mr. Marshall at the tea-table, and poor Miss Frances shivered at the bare apprehension of her sister's state of lively disgust, of which in various similar cases she had had direful experience, should there, after all, prove 'to be nothing in it.'

The next day Mr. Marshall presented himself at Le Doux Repos, as agreed upon with Mrs. Urquhart, to continue their conversation. Eleanor was out with her little sister for a run in the garden, cold as it was, when he arrived ; but before he left she came in, and appeared at the door of her mother's room, hat in hand.

‘May I come in?’ she said timidly. ‘You must excuse me, Mr. Marshall; but I am so afraid of mamma’s being too tired to-day for much talking, that I thought I might venture to interrupt you. She was not at all worse after seeing you yesterday,’ she added hastily, turning to the visitor; ‘but she did not have as good a sleep as usual this morning.’

‘We have finished our talk, dear, in the mean time,’ said Mrs. Urquhart, leaning back rather wearily as she spoke. Eleanor’s quick eyes saw the languor of the movement.

‘You must try to sleep now, mother,’ she said decisively. ‘I will come and sit beside you.’

‘Then good-bye for the present, Mr. Marshall, and thank you so very much for coming again, and for your patience with all my fancies,’ said the invalid warmly, holding out her poor thin hand in farewell.

Mr. Marshall held it gently for a moment, and then, accompanied by Eleanor, left the room.

‘Must you return to Rochette at once, Mr. Marshall?’ asked Eleanor. ‘Can you not spare a few minutes to come in to see monsieur and madame?’

‘I fear not,’ he replied, consulting his watch. ‘I have letters to write, and the post leaves early. But, Miss Urquhart, your mother promised me a few minutes’ interview with you to-morrow morning, if you will be so kind as to spare me the time. That is to say, if—if it is not disagreeable to you. Perhaps you will talk it over with your mother this evening, and—and—Any way, I shall call in the morning.’

Eleanor was not the sort of girl to affect mystification when she felt none.

‘I shall be ready to see you any time you like to come to-morrow morning,’ she said quietly; ‘and thank you very much, far more than much, Mr. Marshall, for the kind way in which you have soothed and comforted my mother.’

‘Not at all—not at all,’ he exclaimed hastily; ‘you know I promised to do my best, Miss Eleanor; and if you don’t like my suggestion when you hear

it from your mother, you must at least—indeed, I am sure you will—forgive it.’

And in some embarrassment, which would have been ten times greater had he had any idea that the young lady in the least understood to what he referred, he bustled about, looking for his greatcoat and hat, which he had left below before going up to Mrs. Urquhart’s room.

‘Here they are,’ said Eleanor, discovering the lost garments in a dark corner, and handing them to him in the simple childlike manner she would have done to her father; ‘and good-night, Mr. Marshall, *au revoir*—that is to say, till to-morrow morning.’

‘Good-night, Miss Urquhart,’ he replied; but in the dusk he avoided shaking hands.

Somehow he felt as if he would rather not do so till she had learnt the whole, and at least, as he had said, *forgiven* it, if she could do no more.

Mrs. Urquhart woke somewhat refreshed by an hour’s sleep, and able for a talk with Eleanor. It was a long talk, and, Nelly feared, a fatiguing one; but as the invalid insisted that till she had said all that was on her mind no more rest would be possible for her, her young nurse was forced to give in.

‘You have made me very happy, Nelly, my dar-

ling. My last days will now be perfectly peaceful and unclouded by any anxiety. Kiss me, my dear good child; and may God for ever bless you!' were her last words to Eleanor that night; and the girl, as she fell asleep, said to herself,

'Even if it had been repulsive to me, it would no longer have seemed so when my mother blesses me for doing it.'

'On vous demande, mademoiselle,' said Rosette in her sick-room tone, poking her head a little way inside the door, as Eleanor sat by her mother's bedside the next morning; 'c'est le grand Monsieur Anglais,' she continued, as the young lady quickly responded to her summons, closing the door behind her, that the invalid might not be disturbed by their voices. 'Pas au salon, dans la petite chambre de M'sieur. M'sieur me l'a dit lui-même. "Faites entrer ici, Rosette," m'a-t-il dit, ce qui m'a bien surpris, mademoiselle, à cause que la petite chambre n'est pas en très bon —'

'N'importe, Rosette,' interrupted Eleanor, as she preceded the distressed housemaid downstairs, and made her way to M. Montluc's little study.

'It is much nicer than for those Miss Jennings

and all the girls to know of Mr. Marshall's calling on purpose to see me. Mamma must have told Monsieur about it. I hope he will stay in the room. It would be so much nicer and easier for me,' she said to herself, as she stood for a moment holding the handle of the door before entering.

It was rather a dingy little den. For a moment she saw no one, and began to fancy Rosette must have made some mistake. Then from a corner rose the tall figure of Mr. Marshall, who had seated himself on a low chair in the darkest part of the room, with possibly a faint hope of somehow concealing himself, and thus at the last moment avoiding the unspeakably awful ordeal which he had rashly brought upon himself. But there was no M. Montluc in the room. Eleanor, for all her calmness, felt a little, a very little, embarrassed.

'I thought Monsieur was here!' she exclaimed, hardly conscious of speaking aloud. Then, as the 'grand Monsieur Anglais' advanced a step or two towards her, she stopped short. 'I beg your pardon, Mr. Marshall,' she said, standing still in the middle of the room; and then, for want of something better to say, 'I thought Monsieur was here,' she repeated.

'M. Mont-Luke has gone out, I believe,' said Mr.

Marshall, in his ponderous way, but not offering with his usual solemn formality to shake hands. 'I trust Mrs. Urquhart is pretty well this morning?'

'Yes, thank you, pretty well,' answered Eleanor, somewhat absently.

She really did not know what to do, having by no means realised beforehand the extreme awkwardness of the situation. If she had thought about it at all, she had pictured it to herself very simply; for in her few interviews with Mr. Marshall she had found him, if stiff and formal, still perfectly calm and unembarrassed, 'business-like,' and ready to come to the point, once he knew what was to be said or done. But now, here he stood, looking something like an elderly schoolboy waiting to be punished; looking, in short, as awkward and uncomfortable as a very shy man, a tall one especially, can look under such circumstances. He was thoroughly sincere in his regard for Eleanor, really in earnest in his hope that she would think favourably of his 'scheme;' but yet at that moment, though the underlying disappointment would have been severe, he would have felt inexpressibly relieved and grateful had she said quietly, 'Mr. Marshall, I cannot agree to your proposal, and I wish you good-morning,' and allowed him to rush out

of the room and hide himself anywhere, to get rid of this terrible nightmare of shyness and embarrassment.

But she said no such words—said indeed nothing at all for some moments; and still she stood there in the middle of the room as if waiting for him to tell her what to do, and looking up at him, he felt sure, though he dared not glance to see, with that calm childlike questioning in her eyes that he already knew so well. He was mistaken; Nelly was looking down, and feeling considerably more uncomfortable, much to her surprise, than she had ever felt in all her life before.

But at last, greatly to her relief, for she felt that she could not have been the one to break the silence, Mr. Marshall cleared his throat.

‘Miss Urquhart’—after two or three false starts he got out her name clearly: she looked up then, feeling no longer ill at ease, now that that dreadful silence was broken—‘Miss Urquhart, you will remember my promising you the other day that I would do my best to arrange things for your future, so as to relieve your mother’s mind from all anxiety.’

‘Yes, Mr. Marshall,’ she said softly.

‘I—I—Mrs. Urquhart will have explained to you

the particulars of my idea,' he went on. 'I asked you last night to forgive me for proposing it, if you could do no more. But—but I should like to hear from yourself what you think of it.'

'I think,' she said clearly, looking straight up into his face, and this time somehow her eyes did not embarrass him, 'I think, Mr. Marshall, that you are very kind, and that I should like it very much.'

All his remaining shyness and awkwardness left him as he heard her simple words, and saw the soft trustful expression that stole into her gray eyes. It was as near an approach to a *moment suprême* as ever he had in his life. He laid his hand on her head.

'God bless you, my child!' he said; 'I trust I may be able to make you happy.'

Then he kissed her gently, with a little return of his usual formality; and she received it calmly, and felt glad to be again quite at ease with her friend. But one thing she said which till now had not struck her with much force.

'Mr. Marshall,' she began, with some timidity, 'you have been very kind to *us* in this; but I have been thinking, are you sure you are kind to yourself in it? Are you sure you will like it?'

‘Like it! my dear Miss Eleanor?’ he exclaimed. ‘Why, it will be the first glimpse of anything like brightness, or—or sunshine, I may say’ (feeling half ashamed of the poetical expression), ‘that I have had all my life. I have not missed it very much hitherto, perhaps. I have generally been busy; but I do not think I shall prize it the less for that. But I am an old man compared to you, my dear. Have you thought of that?’

‘I am not very young for my age, I don’t think,’ said Nelly in her innocence, too young yet to realise her youth. ‘I have had things to age me, you see, Mr. Marshall. I would not like you to be younger, I am sure. And Pauline is very happy with the professor. How funny!’ she added, smiling, as the remembrance suddenly occurred to her; ‘that day I walked through the woods with you, Mr. Marshall, I was telling you all about Pauline!’

So Eleanor Urquhart felt quite satisfied with her new prospects. There was only Georgie, silly little Georgie, to be won round; and this, thought Nelly to herself, would not be very hard to accomplish. ‘For really,’ considered she, ‘her only actual reason for disliking this good Mr. Marshall was the fear of

his taking me away from her. And she cannot but like the idea of my marriage, when I show her it is the only way to insure our never being separated, when—O, mamma, mamma, it has made *you* happy : that is the best reason !'

CHAPTER V.

A SUPERIOR WOMAN.

'Journeys end in lovers' meeting
Every wise man's son doth know.'

Twelfth Night.

'—thou'll marry for luvv— . . .

Gentleman burn! what's gentleman burn? is it shillins and
pence?

Proputty, proputty's ivrything 'ere. . . .

. . . we boäth on us thinks tha an ass.'

Northern Farmer (new style).

MR. MARSHALL'S few days of holiday were soon at an end; and almost before he had begun to realise the bewildering change that had come over his life, he found himself again the sole occupant of the *coupé*, lumbering along the high road to France, with every probability of having to cross the Jura in a sledge.

But notwithstanding the cold and the dreariness, and the thousand-and-one discomforts he might have grumbled at, had he been so inclined, Mr. Marshall felt marvellously philosophical, and disposed to see

things in general in their most favourable light. A little bit of genial warmth—‘sunshine’ he had himself called it to Nelly—had at last found its way into the hitherto rather chilly region of his heart, and, to judge by present appearances, found itself very much more at home there than might have been expected, and not unlikely to establish itself as a permanent inhabitant. There was a great deal about the whole affair that commended itself to the lawyer’s practical and methodical nature. He was not the sort of man to have ‘fallen in love,’ so far as the phrase can be applied to his mild form of the seizure, with any girl simply because she was herself ‘the one woman in the world to him,’ and for no other reason.

Had Eleanor not been Miss Urquhart, her father’s daughter, and his ward, the chances are he would never have observed her, and the idea of making her his wife would never have occurred to him. But, as things were, the arrangement had come up so naturally; there was a neatness, a fitness, a compactness about the whole, that pleased him greatly, and gave him, besides his sincere happiness in the prospect of owning so sweet and loveable a wife, a taste of that peculiar and fascinating sensation said to be the reward of successful match-makers—of having

‘managed the thing nicely,’ taken up two loose threads and twisted them into a substantial cord, done the right thing at the right time and in the right way. Then, too, it was a real satisfaction to the benevolence latent in his character, to feel that he was about to confer a practical benefit on Eleanor and her sister. Half the charm would have been wanting had they been richer or less friendless. The luxury of feeling himself of use, of great use, to others, was a new and delightful experience, immensely enhanced to him also by the reflection that this girl, for whom he had it in his power to make a home, and on whom he hoped to spend the earnings of his lonely hard-working life, was the daughter of the one friend of his youth—nay, of his manhood too; for no one had ever come to fill the place in his regard so long appropriated by Frank Urquhart.

So far, all was pleasant in Mr. Marshall’s reflections; but as his cold journey drew towards its close, and he began to remember that a few more hours must see him in London, other recollections forced their way into his mind. For him, as for others, it was impossible to gather a thornless rose; and the pricks, in his case, first made themselves felt with the remembrance that on his way to

Easterton he must spend a night with his sister, the widowed Mrs. Ellison, and break to her the startling news of his engagement to Miss Urquhart. What she would say, how she would take it, he was quite at a loss to imagine; and in reality he did not very much care; for the relations between the brother and sister, though sufficiently friendly, had never been so intimate as to interfere with their mutual perfect freedom of action. It was the telling her he felt to be so unspeakably awful; the confessing that at his mature age he had been 'caught'—to use a favourite expression of matrons of her class—by the gray eyes and friendless position of a girl of eighteen. And there was Georgie, too. O, it was indeed an appalling recital, he felt within himself, as for the first time he began to review it from the Mrs. Ellison point of view; for his sister was that very terrible thing, 'a remarkably sensible woman.'

It was her 'sense' he was afraid of. He knew her to be perfectly disinterested. She had, indeed, no sort of motive for being otherwise; for at her husband's death, several years previously, she found herself childless, it is true, but rich in all other desirable possessions. Her twenty years of married life in London had left her a thorough cockney; and

she still, at fifty, lived in the same gloomy, handsome, unfashionable house she had come home to as the bride of the prosperous merchant, kept the same hours, in more than one instance the same servants even, and paid a yearly visit to the same watering-place that had been the scene of her honeymoon. Now and then, but at much rarer intervals, she spent a week or two in her brother's house at Easterton; but she disliked the country, and was glad to find herself at home again. Dull as her life might have seemed to a casual observer, it was not so to her. She had a certain steady circle of acquaintances, all more or less connected with the City, among whom she was greatly respected, and with whom she periodically exchanged solemn but magnificent dinner-parties. Now and then, when any specially important entertainment was on the *tapis*, she would summon her brother William up from Easterton, either to escort her thither, or to act host at the foot of her own dining-table.

'I like to show I have some one belonging to me,' she would say confidentially to Mr. Marshall on such occasions; which remark he evidently considered complimentary, as he never failed to put in an appearance when his presence was thus desired.

The one grand excitement in Mrs. Ellison's life was to be found in the news of the commercial world. Her profound interest in such matters was all the more genuine because purely unselfish; her income—a comfortable life-interest, derived from certain moneys most securely invested—being in nowise affected by the financial ups and downs which cause less fortunate individuals to shake in their shoes. No doubt Providence had intended her to be a man, and a man of business, as her husband, though her inferior in many respects, had had sufficient discrimination to discover and turn to profit.

'She has a head, my dear sir,' he used now and then to confide to his brother merchants, when possibly the least in the world elated by the good cheer of one of his own or his friends' miniature Lord-Mayor's banquets; 'she has a *head*, my dear sir, has my wife!'

And this fact remained undisputed throughout her career, rendering her the admiration of the wise, the terror of the foolish. No wonder our poor friend trembled at the prospect of having to confide to the 'lady with a head' his woful lapse from the ranks of the sensible and sober-minded.

It was late at night when Mr. Marshall arrived,

cold and weary, and thoroughly knocked-up by a frightfully rough passage across the Channel, at his sister's house in —— Square. Mrs. Ellison had gone to bed some hours previously; so it was not till the following morning at breakfast that Mr. Marshall's dreaded confession was made. He had no chance of delaying it; for the same day must see him at Easterton; and on the whole, terrible as the ordeal was to him, he preferred communicating it by word of mouth to taking refuge in that favourite resource of moral cowards—writing by post. Setting aside his constitutional bashfulness and many years' habitual awe of his sister, there remained in his mind a considerable spice of curiosity as to how she would take it. 'And above all,' he resolved to himself, 'I must thoroughly convince her that the thing is done, and cannot be undone, even if it were possible, which it never can be, that I should wish to undo my own deliberate work. She is too sensible not to make the best of it, once she understands this, whatever she thinks about it.'

'I suppose I need not ask you if you enjoyed your trip, William,' began Mrs. Ellison, as she poured out the coffee. 'It was not with any idea of enjoyment that you undertook it. What a journey, to be

sure, and at this season too! It was really going a good deal out of your way, unless the business was very important.'

'It was so,' replied Mr. Marshall dryly. His sister's opening observations were not propitious; but he knew that nothing offended her more than not responding to any remark she might condescend to let fall. 'It was very important indeed, as you rightly supposed, from the fact of my undertaking a journey, at any season so contrary to my usual habits. But there's no saying what one may come to do, and enjoy too, for that matter,' he added, with a very feeble attempt at a would-be philosophical, off-handed manner, which was quite foreign to him.

Something even then struck Mrs. Ellison as unusual in his tone, for her powers of perception of the coarser kind were acute. She looked up quickly, and her brother felt that she did so; but she got no satisfaction—he was chipping the top of his egg. Had she yielded to impulse, she would have exclaimed aloud, 'What do you mean, William? what have you been about?' and would probably have received a straightforward and startling answer. But Mrs. Ellison never yielded to impulse. So she said quietly,

‘The love of travelling seems to be growing quite infectious nowadays. I was only saying the other day, I should not object to a third visit to Paris before long, and at a good season. I might even be tempted to take a look at Switzerland.’ She spoke as if Switzerland and all its glories had only existed for the last few millions of years in the hopes of her some day condescending ‘to take a look at them.’ ‘The Greswolds (Robinson, Greswold, and Robinson, you know, William) were dining with me last week; and Fanny—Miss Greswold, that is—was saying how pleasant it would be to make a party this next summer for a continental trip. Themselves and their father, and you and I, William, would make five. A pleasant party—we must think about it. By the bye, William, do *you* know,’ she went on, warming into enthusiasm on the only subject that ever betrayed her into such a weakness, ‘they say—indeed, I had it on the best authority—that those girls, Fanny and Amelia, are put down at one hundred thousand each!’ Here Mrs. Ellison paused for a moment, to give due weight to the solemnity of her announcement. Then she continued: ‘Since old Robinson retired, and young Robinson not taking to the business, Mr. Greswold has had it all his own

way, and has been actually coining money. It is wonderful, to be sure! I remember him, William, not fifteen years ago, before Robinsons took him in as junior partner, for his wife's sake—she was a Miss Robinson—I remember him in a very different way.' (The particulars she kindly left to her hearer's imagination.) 'But he was always a clever man, though inclined to be risky. There's no fear of that now, though; he has very much steadied down, and they are doing a very nice business indeed—a very nice business;' and as she repeated the words, she, figuratively speaking, smacked her lips with relish at their satisfactory sound.

'So much the better for the Miss Greswolds, I suppose,' observed Mr. Marshall; 'but notwithstanding their fortunes, there seems no sign of their changing their name. To be sure, they are no longer very young.'

'No longer very young!' exclaimed Mrs. Ellison, with as near an approach to a scream as she ever permitted herself; 'my dear William, what are you thinking of? Fanny Greswold is not quite three-and-thirty; and Amelia is, to my certain knowledge, two years younger. What do you call young, I should like to know?' And with the question arose again

the strange misgiving that 'something had come over William,' which she had for the moment forgotten in the interest of her *résumé* of Mr. Greswold's career.

'What do I call young?' replied Mr. Marshall jauntily; 'why, eighteen, nineteen—any age, in short, up to—let me see, four-and-twenty, four or five-and-twenty?—yes, up to five-and-twenty, I should say, an unmarried woman may be called young. I should certainly not like to marry any one older. A married woman, of course, counts differently. Why, to go no farther than yourself, my dear Maria, I must confess you give me far more of a feeling of—of—well, we need not say youth, but, any way, of something much farther removed from age, than that old-maidish Fanny Greswold.'

'What *had* come over him?' Mrs. Ellison might well ask—might well feel all but breathless with her horror of suspense. It was too late for any fencing, however skilful, or attempted beating about the bush.

'William,' she said, deliberately but resolutely, with the latent valour of an outraged British matron, ready to lacerate her dearest feelings for the sake of duty, 'William, you know it is not my way to ask

impertinent questions, to volunteer advice, or—or—to meddle with other people's business. Knowing this, William, and knowing that you know it, I can afford, for once in my life, to go out of my way, for your sake to lower myself to the extent of asking, What is the meaning of this? *William, what have you been doing?*

Her tone was very awful, and so was her eye. Mr. Marshall had no choice of policy; downright honesty was the only course open to him.

'I—I—am going to be married, Maria,' he blurted out.

'And to whom?' pursued his tormentor, relaxing neither eye nor tone.

'To Miss Eleanor Urquhart,' he replied firmly; 'the only woman I have ever wished to marry, and the daughter of the best friend I ever had in my life.'

'And this was the important business that took you to Switzerland, or rather, that detained you when you got there; for I know you have not seen the girl before since she was a child,' said Mrs. Ellison, adding, in a tone not without real pathos, 'O, William, William, I did not look for this!'

'I mentioned to you that I was going abroad, on

business connected with the widow of my old friend Urquhart,' said Mr. Marshall, sheltering himself in a slightly aggrieved tone.

'You did,' allowed the sister; 'but, of course, I little thought—indeed, you did not think of it yourself. You cannot deny that a fortnight ago you had no more idea of marrying this Miss Ellen Urquhart than you had of—of—marrying my cook! When I heard of your being summoned to Switzerland on business connected with that silly Mrs. Urquhart (I only saw her once in my life, but it was often enough for me to see she had no head), I was in hopes that she was going to do something sensible—make a rich second marriage, perhaps, herself; but certainly it never struck me that the business was to scheme for a husband for her daughter.'

Mrs. Ellison was on the brink of going too far. The enormity of her brother's folly had startled her out of her usual calm state of superiority; and Mr. Marshall had never seen her so moved. Had the subject of discussion been one of less close personal interest to himself, he would probably have given in. As it was, he felt startled by his sister's vehemence, a little sorry for her, but not a little indignant. Being, however, an eminently peaceful man (though

once he was deeply stirred, there was no altering his resolution), he quietly swallowed his rising resentment, and tried a little temporising.

‘There was, at worst, no scheming about it, my dear Maria,’ he said mildly. ‘Mrs. Urquhart is dying. At her death I become the only guardian of her daughters. This post, even if I wished to do so, I could not now relinquish, after having already held it, legally at least, for several years. So, you see, in any case the young ladies would have been my wards, and I should have been responsible for them in every way.’

One word only of all this seemed to make much impression on Mrs. Ellison.

‘Young *ladies!*’ she exclaimed; ‘how many, then, are there of them?’ and to herself she murmured, ‘Worse and worse—worse and worse! Who would have believed it?’

‘Two,’ rejoined Mr. Marshall; ‘Eleanor, the eldest, my—my—Miss Urquhart, I mean, and a child—a little girl of ten.’

Mrs. Ellison breathed rather more freely.

‘The younger one will, of course, have to go to school,’ she said consideringly; and Mr. Marshall did not think it worth while to contradict her. ‘But

the elder one, how old did you say she was, eighteen?' Mr. Marshall made a sign of assent. 'O, my dear William, if you had but consulted me sooner!' It suited her to affect to think he was doing so *now*. 'I fear—I fear you have acted too unselfishly in this matter. What sort of a life would yours be—you, at your age, and a girl of eighteen? But if, even yet, William, anything else could be done—any more suitable arrangement suggested—I should be most happy, delighted, to help in any plan. She must be well educated, I suppose, having lived so much abroad. I have no doubt she might meet with an excellent situation as governess in some first-rate family. A few years hence would be quite soon enough for her to think of marrying, and—and—more suitably, perhaps.'

'She might marry more suitably in more senses than one,' said Mr. Marshall, when his sister at last stopped to take breath. 'I am old, she is young, and, in my eyes at least, beautiful. I am stiff and soured, she is freshness and sweetness personified. But more than this, in the common way of looking at such things, the advantage is all on my side. Eleanor Urquhart, Maria, comes of a very different stock from ours. Her father was a gentleman born,

and so were his father and grandfather before him. Ours—'

'Began life as an errand-boy, and died worth his thirty thousand pounds,' interrupted Mrs. Ellison stoutly; 'and do you really think, William, I am the sort of person to be ashamed of *that*? Why, all my friends know it, and think the more of me. And quite right too. It's a pity your "gentlemen born" haven't more of the same sort of feeling; then, perhaps, there would be fewer poor girls left orphans in the world—glad to marry the first that asks them.'

The coarse common sense of Mrs. Ellison's remarks was not without its effect on her brother. He felt a little ashamed of the small piece of talking up of his future wife's family, which had drawn them out. He would do better to attempt no self-defence or excuse.

'Your saying so much about the unsuitableness of the marriage does not affect me, Maria,' he began. 'Miss Urquhart and I thoroughly understand each other. That must be enough for you. I am sorry you so much dislike the idea of the step I am going to take, but—but—in short, I cannot help your disliking it. Once for all, I do not wish to annoy you; but I must make you understand this—*nothing* will

influence, in the very least, my determination to make Miss Urquhart my wife—*nothing*. The thing is as much done as if we were already married.’ He rose to his full height as he spoke, and stood looking down at his sister with no trace of awkwardness or shyness in his air or manner.

Mrs. Ellison saw that he meant what he said, and had the sense to surrender with a good grace. For once in her life she recognised the fact, that her brother was a man, and she herself a woman.

‘Very well, William,’ she said in her ordinary tone; ‘I understand you, and you have my good wishes.’ (She vindicated her claim to being a very superior woman, by not adding, ‘I hope you may never live to repent it!’)

‘Thank you, Maria,’ replied Mr. Marshall; and then Mrs. Ellison rose from her seat and walked towards the door, murmuring something of its being time to see the cook about dinner.

She stopped, however, before leaving the room, and said pleasantly, turning to her brother, ‘I shall be interested in hearing the details of your plans, William, when you have had time to arrange them. And if you think of making any changes in your household, you know you can always count on my

assistance in choosing servants, or furniture, or anything.'

'Thank you, Maria,' repeated Mr. Marshall, more heartily than before; 'thank you, I shall not forget your kind offer. Yes, I shall have a good deal to consider, but I have decided nothing as yet.'

So they parted on the most amicable terms after all; and an hour later, Mr. Marshall was on the railway, bound for Easterton, where he arrived safely, and resumed his usual habits, with no extraordinary alteration in his outer man to reveal to his neighbours the fact of his having returned from Rochette engaged to be married.

CHAPTER VI.

A COINCIDENCE.

'I believe they were talking of me, for they laughed consumedly.'

The Beaux' Stratagem.

ONE of the pleasantest houses in that division of the large county of Woldshire in which Easterton was situated was Nugent Priory. It was pleasant in every sense of the word, notwithstanding that its owner, familiarly known as 'th' ould Squoire,' bore, and deservedly, the reputation of being the greatest fusser of all the country-side. Fussiness with him amounted to a perfect disease, and in that light his much-enduring wife and children came at last to regard it. Fortunately for themselves and other people, none of the latter 'took after' their father in this respect, but resembled without exception their sweet-tempered mother, who, had she not possessed calm self-control and patience passing those of most

women, would certainly have been worried into her grave long before her children were of an age to display their dispositions or profit by her example. As it was, however, she lived for many years to enjoy her reward, in the persons of as fine a group of boys and girls—young men and women they were fast becoming—as is often to be seen. The one crook in their lot was their father's uneasy temperament, which would neither allow him to enjoy anything himself nor let other people do so in peace. His infirmity, as was to be expected, by no means decreased with years; but people got used to it, and the young Nugents and their mother were so invariably amiable and considerate, that their friends came to pay no more attention to the Squire's fussing than to the growling, which never came to biting, of the pet dog of the house, a small Skye terrier, known as Fidget. How he came by the name was never discovered, and Mr. Nugent himself used it in the most innocent manner.

Nothing was commoner in Easterton than for two or three expresses to arrive from the Grange in the course of as many hours; but nobody was ever startled by them, once the Nugent livery or horses were recognised.

‘What’s the matter now, Jem?’ or ‘Bill,’ as the case might be, the tradesmen would ask calmly, as they came to their doors to greet the messengers of the eccentric gentleman; and Squire Nugent’s last freak would serve them in place of a better joke till a new one came to supersede it.

The poor doctor of Easterton never retired to rest without expressing a fervent hope that, let who would be wakeful, Mr. Nugent might sleep sound till morning; and Mr. Marshall was at last deceitful enough to make a permanent stand against being called up to draw out new wills in the middle of the night, by pleading a chronic bronchitis, hitherto unsuspected, which would not permit him to face the night air.

A sufficiently excusable excitement was at present engrossing the Squire’s superfluous energies. His eldest daughter, Madeline, was about to be married; and it argued well for her own attractions as well as for the good sense and good temper of her husband-to-be, that the number of drafts of settlements and proposed alterations in the one finally agreed upon, had not long ago frightened him off the field.

Mr. Marshall was by no means surprised—indeed,

the contrary would have most agreeably disappointed him—to find on his office-desk, on his return home, no less than six notes in the well-known handwriting of Mr. Nugent. He had left orders for them not to be forwarded, and his commands had been scrupulously fulfilled, in defiance of the ‘Immediates’ in large letters scrawled on the left-hand corner of each envelope. Crosby, Mr. Marshall’s old clerk, had labelled the letters one to six respectively, and the lawyer took up number two at hazard. It informed him, ‘for the second time,’ the writer ‘supposing some accident had happened to his former letter, as no notice had been taken of it,’ that Miss Nugent’s marriage was to be hastened by some weeks, ‘owing to important considerations;’ and that Mr. Marshall’s presence on the evening preceding that of the ceremony was imperatively required.

‘If you cannot *promise* to be on the spot,’ wrote the fussy gentleman, ‘I must at once secure a substitute. Be so good as reply by bearer.’ The tenor of numbers three, four, and five was the same, each amusingly increasing in pomposity of language, as the Squire’s indignation waxed hotter. Number six was short and sweet.

‘Sir,’ it ran, ‘if you wish me to transfer my

business *at once* to the *respectable* firm of Messrs. Poke and Sneak of Wolding, you will *not* take any notice of this *last* intimation that Miss Nugent's marriage is to take place on *Thursday the 21st instant*, and that the business connected therewith is to be concluded the evening previous.'

The Squire underlined his words like a woman, and the angrier he was, the thicker and more numerous grew his clumsy black dashes.

Mr. Marshall glanced up at the perpetual calendar hanging on the wall above his desk.

'Thursday the 21st,' he exclaimed; 'why, that's the day after to-morrow! There is nothing really but what young Knowles, or Crosby even, could have seen to, had I been detained; but all the same, I suppose, I have at last run a very near chance of having the Nugent deeds transferred to that very respectable firm at Wolding. And I really could almost wish it had been so. But I must not set my preparations afloat by letting my business slip out of my hands, or I might begin to think Maria was in the right.'

He smiled slightly to himself at the thought, and then wrote a few words to Squire Nugent, explaining his silence, and promising to present himself without fail at the Priory as requested on the following even-

ing. Then he returned to his dingy little dining-room, which, somehow, had never looked dingier than it did this evening, and for lack of more amusing occupation, took up the local paper of nearly a week back which was lying about, and turned it over in search of news. But news there was none; and Mr. Marshall was just on the point of throwing the newspaper aside, when an advertisement, headed 'To let, with immediate entry,' caught his eye. He read it over carefully, then cut it out neatly, and slipped it into his pocket-book.

'Just the very thing, it seems,' he said to himself; 'rather far off, perhaps. Chesney—let me see—six or seven miles from this at the most. No, I don't think it would be too far; but I can't think what house it can be. I remember none answering that description, and I used to know Chesney village very well. Still, it is several years since I was there.'

His meditations referred to a decision he had come to in his own mind, though he had not as yet made any definite plans. He had determined not to bring his young wife home to Easterton, but to look about till he found some pretty little place in the neighbouring country, where life would seem brighter

and fresher to her than in the uninteresting ugly little town. She loved the country and all belonging to it, she had told him ; and with Georgie, there was no fear of her being dull. And besides, he felt instinctively that, simple and little accustomed to society as she was, there was a certain something about her which would make it difficult for her to amalgamate with the few families constituting the little world of Easterton.

‘She would not take to them, nor they to her,’ he said to himself; ‘and there would be disagreeable remarks about the disparity of years between us. No, I should not like it at all. Besides, when we are first married, she is very sure to be disinclined for society of any kind.’

For, in deference to Mrs. Urquhart’s earnest wish to see her daughter actually Mr. Marshall’s wife before she died, it had been decided that the marriage should not be long delayed ; and there was a tacit understanding, that when any distinct change, which could not now but be for the worse, took place in the invalid’s condition, he should be immediately sent for. There was another reason for this arrangement, to be found in the extreme legal difficulty attending a marriage in Switzerland, where the bride was a

minor, unless there was a surviving parent to grant a formal consent. So, by the time he left Rochette, Mr. Marshall was able to see some little way before him, and Nelly nerved herself to talk cheerfully to her mother of the ideal little rose-clad cottage, in some one of the many picturesque villages of Woldshire, which was to be her own and Georgie's future home.

'But O, mamma, if only you were not quite so ill, if you were just well enough to go there with us and see it, so that we could always think you *had* been there, even if only for a little while!'

And as she said these words, an agonising vision rose before her eyes of a dear little home of the kind they had been speaking of; a home where they three—her mother, Georgie, and herself—might, it seemed to her, have lived for ever in unalloyed content. There was no Mr. Marshall in her picture; in such a case there would have been no need of him.

A sort of spasm of revolt against the cruelty, the apparent needlessness of the fiat that had gone forth against this simple happiness of theirs, seized Eleanor for a moment with a force, an agony of intensity all the more overwhelming from its contrast with her habitual self-control.

'O God,' she whispered, with an anguish of en-

treaty, though no human ear heard the words, 'I ask so little! Why, why must it be refused me? Other daughters are spared this, who little value what to me is far more than life. Why must I be made to bear it?'

But though she hid her face in the pillows of her mother's couch, she allowed no other sign of her rare agitation to appear. Then she heard that mother's gentle voice in answer to the vain wish she had allowed herself to express.

'Nelly, my darling,' it said, 'I *may* be able to see you, though you may not know it. I cannot but think it must be so; and I want you to think so too; for it may make it easier for you to be happy. I have one silly little wish about it. I should so like if Mr. Marshall could fix upon your future home *soon*; so that I might, as it were, go away with a picture of it in my heart.'

Nelly mentioned this innocent fancy of her mother's in her next letter to her guardian. Curiously enough, that very letter of hers crossed one of his—the second after his return home—giving her a description of the house at Chesney he had seen advertised in the *Easterton Gazette*, which by that time he had been to see for himself. And this brings us

back to the history of Mr. Marshall's adventures at Nugent Priory the day preceding pretty Madeline's marriage.

On the morning of that day the groom, who had in the course of the last fortnight called six times at Mr. Marshall's office, and left six notes for that gentleman, appeared again with a seventh. But this time the handwriting was Mrs. Nugent's. Understanding from the Squire that Mr. Marshall was to be at the Priory that evening on business, she wrote to tell him he must not think of returning home that night, but must really give them the pleasure of his company at dinner, sleep at the Priory—he would excuse a small room, the house being so full of wedding guests—and be present at the ceremony the following day. Madeline especially very much wished her old friend Mr. Marshall to make one of the party; and 'just at present, of course,' added her mother, 'Madeline's wishes are laws.'

It was Mrs. Nugent all over, trying in her gentle womanly way to make amends for her husband's domineering rudeness. Under the circumstances, the lawyer could not but accept the invitation, rare as such dissipation was for him.

'I may be able to pick up some information

about that house,' he said to himself. 'Mrs. Nugent may know which it is.'

So the evening found the lawyer one of the guests assembled at the Priory, where he received a gracious welcome from his hostess, and a rather abrupt shake of the hand from the Squire, considered, however, by that gentleman as ample apology for the somewhat strong language of the last of the six notes.

'And so you have been in Switzerland, Mr. Marshall, I hear?' said Mrs. Nugent. 'Dear me! what a cold journey you must have had! Was it your first visit to Switzerland?'

But dinner was announced before our friend had time to reply. There was a large number of guests, as was to be expected on such an occasion; but, contrary to the usual fate of marriage-parties, there was a considerable predominance of gentlemen; and consequently Mr. Marshall found himself seated at table between two of his own sex: at the left side one of the younger Nugents, most satisfactorily employed in flirting with his next neighbour, a merry little girl of sixteen, one of the bridesmaids; at the right a young man, whom he could not remember having ever seen before, though a slight shadowy resemblance

he bore to 'somebody' gave Mr. Marshall the feeling, familiar to us all, of 'I should know who you are, but I don't.'

The dinner was excellent; and Mr. Marshall's appetite had been agreeably sharpened by his eight miles' drive in the cold. He would have been perfectly content to enjoy it in silence, had it not suddenly dawned upon him, half way through the meal, that every one round the table was talking and laughing save himself and his right-hand neighbour. Harry Nugent was too young and too engrossed by the fun of the moment to pay attention to the lawyer's silence; and Mrs. Nugent was too far away at her end of the table to draw him insensibly into the conversation, as she certainly would have done had she been near enough to perceive his isolated position. In point of fact, no one had remarked him particularly. But what shy man ever lays this flattering (or unflattering) unction to his soul in such circumstances? Besides, Mr. Marshall was not only shy; he was a stranger to nearly all present; and he was naturally the very antipodes of the conventional hail-fellow-well-met country lawyer, whose vulgarity renders it easy for him to make himself at home in any society, and

who has always at hand an inexhaustible store of local gossip, failing other subjects of conversation.

Our poor friend began to grow very uncomfortable, and felt that he must do something. Interrupting the boy Nugent in his flirtation was not to be thought of; his only resource was the young man on his right, who was as silent as himself. Perhaps he too was a stranger, and would feel grateful for a little attention. The thought gave Mr. Marshall sudden courage, which carried him the length of three times clearing his throat in an introductory manner, and three times half turning towards his neighbour, as if on the point of hazarding an observation. But to all these intimations of a sociable state of feeling, the young man appeared perfectly blind and deaf, and but for the mechanical movement of his knife and fork, the lawyer could have believed he was asleep. At last he grew bolder.

‘Cold weather for driving to-day, sir,’ he remarked. ‘I fear there will be snow before morning.’

For a moment there was no reply. Then the young man started slightly, as if it had just struck him that the words, the sense of which had not reached him, had been addressed to him. He turned

towards Mr. Marshall, from the expression of whose face he evidently judged that his surmise was correct.

‘I beg your pardon,’ he said, so slowly and softly as to make his hearer inclined to exclaim, ‘What an affected young man!’ ‘I believe you were speaking to me; and I am very sorry, but I did not catch your words. I think I have been in a brown study all dinner-time.’

The voice was so sweet, the tone so courteous, that the suspicion of affectation in both failed to irritate as it usually does. Had they been otherwise indeed, the gentle kindly expression of the hazel eyes could not but have counteracted any unfavourable impression. But at the very first glance, Mr. Marshall’s theory that here was a partner in shyness fell to the ground.

‘It is of no consequence—no consequence at all,’ he said hurriedly. ‘I was merely remarking that we shall probably have snow before morning.’

‘Very probably indeed, I should say,’ replied the young man, putting a tone of interest even into these commonplace words, by way of setting his companion at ease. It required no very acute powers of observation to discern the shy discomfort but half hidden by the lawyer’s stiff pomposity; and his neighbour

took blame to himself for having hitherto neglected him. Whatever his faults, no woman ever possessed a quicker tact, a more delicate consideration for the feelings of others, than were to be found in Maurice Chesney ; which surely, paradoxical as it sounds, goes some way towards vindicating the *manliness* not unfrequently called in question by those blunter natures, whom his sleepy manner and somewhat effeminate appearance not unnaturally deceived as to his real character.

‘It will be very unfortunate if we have a snow-storm for the wedding to-morrow,’ pursued Mr. Chesney ; ‘I should not wonder if it tempts the Squire to delay it, after all. You have heard the reason of its being hastened ?’

‘No, sir, I have not,’ answered Mr. Marshall, beginning to feel not a little delighted with the success of his manœuvre, and pricking-up his ears to hear the particulars of Mr. Nugent’s ‘important considerations.’ Maurice Chesney had foreseen that a fellow-feeling of amusement would be generated by a little harmless gossip about their host, and smiled quietly when he saw his prim neighbour’s evident interest.

‘It was nothing of consequence, as you can fancy,’

he began, for he had a fair idea whom he was addressing, having overheard Mrs. Nugent's remarks about Mr. Marshall from Easterton being expected, 'about the settlements signing, you know,' and judging he might safely dilate a little on the Squire's eccentricities to the unfortunate 'man of business,' who must have had sore experience thereof. 'A fortnight ago the clergyman here was rash enough to mention, that he had engaged workpeople to paint the inside of the church next month. The Squire declared no one of his family should set foot in it till two months after the beautifying, as they call it, was over, as it took that time to get rid of the poison of the fresh paint. Mr. Redfern got obstinate, and no wonder; said he could not and would not delay the affair; and he and the Squire have had a tremendous quarrel. The chances are, Miss Nugent would have had to make a runaway match of it if she wanted to get married at all, if she and her mother—and her *fiancé*, of course—had not hit upon the expedient of hastening the marriage. They managed it very cleverly, I must say; for at this moment the Squire thinks it was his own idea.'

Mr. Marshall chuckled quietly to himself at the charming notion of his tormentor being taken in.

‘Very good, very good indeed, sir!’ he said, and then began chuckling again with such evident enjoyment of the story, that Mr. Chesney was very near laughing himself, though he had not before imagined there was anything particularly funny in the affair. But it is always pleasant to succeed in an attempt, however trifling; and Maurice began to feel quite amiably disposed towards his companion, finding him so ready to be entertained and amused by his conversation. They talked very comfortably on several subjects, and though the elder man was as matter-of-fact as the younger was dreamy, found more common ground of interest than would have been predicted by any one knowing them both. Then they came back to a little small-talk again, about the arrangements for the next day, &c.; and Mr. Marshall inquired the names of several of the guests who were strangers to him, among these that of a young lady some way down the table, on the other side, whose appearance was very remarkable.

‘That,’ said his informant, ‘is Miss Berners. *The* Miss Berners; that is to say, she is sure to be called so before long. She is hardly out yet.’

‘And is the gentleman beside her her brother?’ asked Mr. Marshall simply.

‘Her brother?’ repeated Mr. Chesney, slightly raising his dark eyebrows in amusement at the notion of a thorough-going young lady, even of Miss Berners’ tender years, laying herself out for the edification of a brother, as the incipient beauty was now doing for that of her handsome neighbour,—‘her brother; O dear, no! That is young Browne—Brown with an *e*—a cousin of Mrs. Nugent’s, and a penniless lieutenant in the —th. O no; Miss Berners is

“all the daughters of her father’s house,
And all the brothers too—”

that is one of her attractions. She is an heiress as well as a beauty.’

Mr. Marshall stared a little. His companion’s way of talking puzzled him rather.

‘*Is* she a beauty?’ he said dubiously, glancing as he spoke at the object of their discussion.

Maurice Chesney looked highly entertained; his companion’s prim unconventional honesty was greatly to his taste.

‘A beauty? Yes, certainly she is; or, as I said, is just going to be,’ he replied; ‘but if you mean to ask if she is *beautiful*, I should be much less ready to say yes. For one thing, she is too small—I agree with Byron—

“I hate a dumpy woman”—

—small in everything, I expect, though just now it is put down to childishness ; but she is certainly wonderfully pretty.’

He had lowered his voice as he spoke, and seemed almost to be thinking aloud rather than addressing Mr. Marshall, who put him down in his own mind as ‘a very pleasant but rather odd young man,’ and wondered more than ever who he could be.

Mrs. Nugent managed to find a few minutes in the course of the evening to resume her interrupted conversation with her late-invited guest, and to thank him for coming at such short notice. They talked a little about Switzerland ; she knew Rochette well, it appeared ; but Mr. Marshall was far too shy to tell her any particulars of his journey.

‘Easterton must look uglier than ever to you after Switzerland,’ she said ; ‘even in winter, Rochette is lovely.’

‘Easterton is certainly not an attractive spot,’ rejoined Mr. Marshall sententiously ; ‘but I think its neighbourhood in some directions might almost bear to be compared with that of Rochette. Just near here it is flat, though pretty ; but out towards Chesney, for instance, it is very picturesque. I am think-

ing of leaving my house at Easterton, Mrs. Nugent, and taking one in the country.'

'Are you indeed?' she said with some surprise; 'but will you not find it very dull?'

'O no, I think not,' replied the gentleman, looking rather awkward; 'I think not. I shall drive in to Easterton every day, and be at the office as usual. I have heard of a house to-be let at Chesney, by the bye, but I do not know which it is. Possibly you may have heard of there being a house vacant there; a good-sized house with a large garden?'

'At Chesney,' said Mrs. Nugent consideringly; 'no, I do not remember having heard of any. But I will tell you how you can easily hear about it at once; that is to say, if it belongs to Sir Robert. Mr. Chesney is here to-night; so I will introduce you, and you can easily find out about it in talking to him.'

'Thank you,' answered Mr. Marshall. 'Mr. Chesney? A son of Sir Robert's, I presume?'

'O no,' replied the lady, somewhat surprised at the Easterton lawyer's ignorance; 'Sir Robert has no children. This young man Maurice is his step-brother. I should have thought you would know all about them; so near Easterton.'

‘I am not Sir Robert’s man of business,’ replied Mr. Marshall simply; ‘and you know, my dear madam, I live a very retired life. Which is Mr. Chesney, may I ask?’

Mrs. Nugent glanced round, but Maurice was not in sight.

‘I don’t see him,’ she then said; ‘he is a good-looking young man. Pale and dark-haired, and with good features, but rather sleepy-looking, and—’

‘Where did he sit at dinner?’ asked the lawyer.

‘To be sure!’ she exclaimed, ‘he was your neighbour. How stupid of me! I remember quite well seeing him beside you when I looked down the table. How did you get on with him, Mr. Marshall? He is very uncertain. No one can make himself more agreeable than Maurice Chesney, when he chooses; but that is far from being always the case. Sometimes he will sit perfectly silent a whole evening. Some call it affectation, some absence; for my part I can’t make him out. He is certainly not sociable: though such an old friend in one sense—we have known him since boyhood—he hardly ever comes to see us.’

‘He was extremely polite to me at dinner,’ said

Mr. Marshall; 'he pointed out to me many of your friends with whom I was unacquainted.'

'I am glad of that,' said Mrs. Nugent heartily. 'By the bye, have you admired our Woldshire beauty—Miss Berners?'

'She was among those whom Mr. Chesney named to me,' replied the lawyer. 'I wonder I did not think who he was. I heard some of the gentlemen address him by name after dinner, but I thought they said "Chester." O yes, he told me who Miss Berners was, and discussed her too.'

'Discussed her!' repeated Mrs. Nugent, looking much amused; 'do tell me what he said, Mr. Marshall.'

'O, only that her beauty was a matter of taste, in which I—I rather fear I agreed with him,' confessed he, looking rather alarmed. 'I did not admire her very much. At least she gave me the impression of being very—rather—I cannot express what I mean better than by saying she is very unlike *your* daughters, my dear madam.'

Of course Mrs. Nugent bowed and smiled at the little compliment.

'You mean she is too much of a fine lady already. Well, I daresay it is true; but then there is every-

thing to spoil her; and she is really marvellously pretty.'

'I trust there was no harm in what I—at least in my not expressing much admiration of the young lady to Mr. Chesney?' asked Mr. Marshall naively.

'O, no; Maurice had himself to thank for it by what you tell me,' replied his hostess; 'and there may be no foundation for a report that has got about the neighbourhood that Mr. Chesney and Miss Berners are—not engaged—but *to be* engaged some time hence, when she has been out a little. A sort of family compact it is said to be; they do not say much about the feelings of the young people themselves in the matter. Those arranged marriages seldom turn out well; and really young Chesney must be very peculiar.'

'Has he no profession?'

'O, yes; he is in the Guards, and takes care to tell everybody on all occasions how he hates it. He has been mismanaged somehow. He is quiet, and rather clever, if he would apply himself; but *so* desultory. Sir Robert is a hard man, and jealous of Maurice, a brother only, being his heir. It was a great mistake putting him into the Guards. He would not have made a bad clergyman; but there,

again, just like him, he has taken up peculiar religious notions. He must be very provoking; though I pity him too. But even *my* boys,' with a little pardonable maternal pride in the accent, 'can't get on with him. He cares for none of their interests or amusements. It comes partly perhaps from his having been so delicate as a child, and having no mother. She died, you know, when he was born, and his father two years after. But, Mr. Marshall, I see Madeline looking for me. How I wish to-morrow were over! *Would* you go and talk to the Squire a little—he is all alone over there—about Switzerland or anything, just to keep him amused?'

'Certainly I will,' said Mr. Marshall with alacrity, but detaining his hostess for a moment, as she was turning away, to add, 'perhaps, my dear madam, it would be as well to make no inquiry about the house from Mr. Chesney. If, as you say, he is a—a—little peculiar, he might not like it, might think it a liberty. I can easily drive over and make inquiries myself on the spot.'

'You need not have any feeling of that kind about it at all, I assure you, Mr. Marshall,' replied Mrs. Nugent; 'it will be all right; and much better to hear about it from Mr. Chesney, and save yourself

the trouble of going so far, if from his description it is not suitable. O dear, no, Maurice Chesney is not peculiar in *that* way; or rather he is, for he is most peculiarly kindly and obliging.'

CHAPTER VII.

THE FEATHERS.

'I've often wish'd that I had clear
For life six hundred pounds a year,
A handsome house to lodge a friend,
A river at my garden's end.'

SWIFT, *Imit. of Horace.*

IN the course of the evening Mr. Chesney strolled up to Mr. Marshall.

'I am glad to hear from Mrs. Nugent,' said he to the lawyer, 'that there is a chance of your becoming a neighbour of ours. I am so sorry I did not know it before, as we should have been able to talk it over comfortably at dinner. Now I hear some frightful whispers of an impromptu dance in the next room, and I suppose I *must* devote myself to my particular bridesmaid; so we shall not long be left in peace.'

'O, thank you,' replied Mr. Marshall; 'a very

little information will satisfy me if the house is at all likely to suit me, and if so, I can go to see it. May I ask if it is on your estate?

‘On my brother’s,’ answered the young man, with a slight accent on the substantive; ‘it is in Chesney village. You know the village, I daresay, Mr. Marshall?’

‘I have not been there more than twice in the last twenty years,’ he replied, ‘though I knew it well as a boy. My most distinct remembrance of it is the day your brother, Sir Robert, came of age. There were great rejoicings, and several of us young men came over from Easterton to see them. It must have been before you were born, sir, or very shortly after. I remember your father, Sir Thomas, exceedingly well. You are very like him, though I could not give a name to the resemblance till I heard yours.’

Maurice looked pleased.

‘Yes,’ he replied, ‘I believe I am—at least the country people always tell me I “favour” him greatly. But about this house, Mr. Marshall—mind I can tell you nothing officially, Sir Robert manages his own affairs—all, that is to say, that a mere bailiff can’t do—and I know very little about them. Lucky for them, I daresay; I am a shocking bad man of busi-

ness. But I can tell you this much: Sir Robert will be uncommonly glad to let it to a good tenant, for we are all—that is to say, they are all—going abroad for two years, and this house is a good deal on my brother's mind.'

'I should have thought it would let very easily,' observed Mr. Marshall. 'Chesney is so picturesque.'

'So it would, no doubt,' said Maurice; 'but you see he has only just decided to let it as a private house, and set to work altering it; and he wants to get a tenant after his own heart straight away, and to come to terms and all that before going abroad. The alterations will be all finished in a few weeks, and, to my mind, it will be quite a charming house.'

Mr. Marshall looked puzzled.

'I don't quite understand,' he said; 'you say it is to be let for the first time as a private house, and you speak of alterations. May I ask what alterations?'

Maurice smiled.

'Just like me—beginning at the end and ending in the middle—never to have told you what house it is! It is The Feathers, Mr. Marshall, the old Chesney Feathers, that is being transmogrified into a gentleman's residence. Since the last coach left off running

there is really no "call" for an inn in the village, not, at least, for so large a one. So when the landlord, old Dykes, died last Christmas, Sir Robert set to work to remodel it, and, as I said, it will be a charming little place. The only objection will be, you will never get any one to call it anything *but* The Feathers. There is a story attached to our Chesney feathers, you know; they don't mean the Prince of Wales's plume.'

'Indeed!' said Mr. Marshall, rather absently. It was a little shock to his prejudices, to hear the history of the house; he could not all at once take in the idea of establishing his household gods in a transmogrified inn. 'I wonder what Maria would think of it,' he said to himself; 'her judgment is so excellent, she would be able to tell in an instant how it would be likely to strike Eleanor.' Then he added aloud, 'You are right, Mr. Chesney. I remember The Feathers distinctly. I confess I cannot quite picture it to myself turned into a private residence; but from what you say in its favour, I will, with your permission, drive over and see it for myself.'

'Don't say, with my permission,' said Maurice quickly; 'I have no more right to give permission than you have. But of course it will be all right for

you to come, and I shall be delighted to meet you there and do the honours of The Feathers. Let me see, what day will suit you? Sir Robert is away for a week; but I think I can promise to keep it open for you for a few days. There is only one other application, and that is from a lady who keeps a boarding-school, and my brother did not like the idea at all. Though it is a good mile and a half from the Court, he fancies a boarding-school would be a nuisance, and he wants the garden kept nice. You have not a large family, I suppose, Mr. Marshall? I fancy you would have been asking more particulars as to the number of rooms had that been the case.'

Mr. Marshall looked so uncomfortable, that Maurice's own face flushed with annoyance at having asked a painful or awkward question.

'I beg your pardon,' he said hurriedly, 'I really beg your pardon;' but almost before he had said the words his companion had recovered himself, and looked half inclined to laugh.

'Not at all, not at all,' he exclaimed; 'it is quite right. I have not a large family, Mr. Chesney; there will be only—one little girl.'

'Ah, then it will suit you exactly,' replied the young man. 'I am quite sure you will like it. You

would never know it had been an inn, though I cannot answer for its not being haunted. There are not very many rooms, as several partitions have been pulled down; but what there are are a fair size. Some of the old oak is delicious too. Then what day will you be over?’

‘Will you allow me to send you a line by post to-morrow?’ asked the lawyer. ‘I cannot quite fix a time till I see what my engagements are likely to be at Easterton the next day or two, having only just returned home.’ And thus it was agreed.

The marriage the next day ‘went off,’ of course, charmingly. It would be an exception to hear of a marriage of which this could not be said, though, under the circumstances of her being her father’s daughter, there was some excuse for every one concerned feeling peculiarly thankful when the ceremony was over, and Madeline Nugent safely converted into Lady Carthew without further let or hindrance.

Mr. Marshall returned to Easterton none the worse for his little dissipation, but found enough to do for the next few days in unravelling the various loose threads of his business out of the confusion into which Messrs. Crosby and Knowles had managed to twist them during the fortnight of his absence.

‘It is really disheartening,’ he said to himself. ‘I must never take long holidays, that is very clear. The more reason for me to find as pleasant a home as I can for Eleanor, for she will not have much variety, I fear.’

He wrote to Mr. Chesney, fixing a day in the following week for his visit to The Feathers ; and received an answer from his new acquaintance expressing regret that an early engagement at some distance on the day in question would prevent his being able ‘to do the honours’ in person ; but that full directions should be left with the bailiff to show Mr. Marshall the house, and furnish him with all particulars possible to ascertain in Sir Robert’s absence. But it was not fated that our poor bachelor should do his house-hunting singly. Two days after his return to Easterton he received an unexpected letter from his sister, asking if he would take her in for a short visit, as she found it necessary to leave home during some household repairs.

‘I thought they could have been put off till later in the spring,’ wrote Mrs. Ellison ; ‘but as I am told there may be an explosion any day in the present state of the kitchen boiler, I think it better to run no risk ; and I should enjoy a few days with you at

Easterton, to talk over your plans, and assist you in any way in my power.'

This was an unmistakeable olive-branch; and as Mrs. Ellison was not one to do things by halves, Mr. Marshall was very glad to accept it: cautiously, however. He had no idea of allowing his sister to rush from the extreme dislike she had at first expressed to his marriage, to the other extreme of patronising his wife-to-be, and 'managing' their affairs for them rather more than would be desirable. At the present juncture, however, the offer of her assistance came most opportunely; and he accepted it cordially, telling her of the house at Chesney, concerning which he would be most grateful for her advice, being himself quite a novice in such matters, and under the circumstances 'unable to consult with Miss Urquhart.'

So, on the Wednesday following, Mr. Marshall having chartered an open fly for the occasion, that they might 'see the country as they went along' (his own two-wheeled dog-cart being far beneath the dignity of a Mrs. Ellison) mounted therein, preceded by his sister, and was soon jolting along the high road to Chesney. It was a beautiful day, a whisper of spring already in the air; just the day to give one a fresh favourable impression of a little house in the

country seen for the first time ; and the surroundings of The Feathers were really charming enough in themselves to require no very great amount of weather gilding. Mr. Marshall's spirits rose in an unusual way.

'Very pleasant, is it not, Maria?' he observed when about half way to their destination, and he sniffed the sweet spring air approvingly.

'Very, in fine weather,' rejoined Mrs. Ellison, with a slight suspicion of wet blanket in her tone; 'but you would find it a long six miles on a cold rainy morning, William.'

'Hum—well, I don't think I should be afraid of it,' he began ; but before he had time to say more, a sudden exclamation from his sister startled away his gaze from the fields and hedges at his side of the carriage, which for some time he had been contemplating with the satisfaction of a man whose days are mostly spent in a fusty little office. They were just about turning a corner, and had all but run into another carriage coming along at full speed. For a moment the respective drivers were obliged to pull up, and in that moment the occupant of the carriage recognised Mr. Marshall. He jumped out, and came to the side of the fly.

‘I beg ten thousand pardons,’ he said; ‘I hope we have not startled you, or—Mrs. Marshall, I presume,’ raising his hat to Mrs. Ellison ‘I am so very sorry, Mr. Marshall, not to be able to meet you at The Feathers this morning; but I am off to Prandeth, and am in a tremendous hurry to catch the train. I do hope you will take a fancy to Chesney;’ and almost before the bewildered lawyer had had time to recognise him, he was gone, and the fly jogging calmly along the road again.

‘That is young Chesney,’ remarked Mr. Marshall to his companion.

‘Ah, indeed!’ she rejoined. ‘I could not catch what he said. A gentlemanly young man he appeared to be.’

On his part, Maurice’s impression of the imaginary Mrs. Marshall was not a particularly favourable one.

‘I don’t think *she* will be much of an acquisition,’ he said to himself. Then he turned to his servant, a young groom born and bred in the neighbourhood, and thoroughly up in all the local gossip.

‘That was Mrs. Marshall, I suppose, Davis?’ he said. ‘You know all the Easterton people.’

‘There bain’t no Mrs. Marshall, sir,’ replied the

lad; 'leastways Mr. Marshall of Easterton bain't married, though I have heerd say he were a-going to be. Maybe the lady was Mrs. Marshall to be, sir,' he suggested, after some consideration.

'Very likely,' replied Maurice aloud; and then went on thinking to himself, 'That explains the poor man's absurd confusion the other night, when I asked with my usual discretion if he had a large family. Dear me, what an ugly old woman! Older than he, I'm certain; and a widow too, she must be, for he said something about one little girl. Not a very little one, I should say, if that old lady's her mother. And I really liked the man, he was so beautifully honest and old-fashioned. I feel quite disappointed. Now, if he had had a nice, cheery, comely little wife of thirty or thereabouts, I might really have taken to the two of them. Have dropped, in of an evening now and then, for instance, when I felt I *could* not play whist with Robert, or if Horatia were extra disagreeable. But that terribly-gorgeous old lady—ugh! All the same they will do very well as tenants, I daresay, which is all Robert cares about.'

And with the slightest possible sensation of regret he said good-bye to his infinitesimal castle in the air, as, poor fellow, he had said good-bye to many others

of varying importance in the short quarter of a century which to him represented life. But during the course of the next two years, on the rare occasions on which the name of his brother's new tenant happened to be mentioned in his hearing, the 'Mrs. Marshall' who rose before his mind's eye was the 'very terrible old lady' he had seen for an instant that morning in the Easterton fly.

Two or three miles farther on, another sudden turn in the road brought Mr. Marshall and his sister into the middle of Chesney village, which, approached from the Easterton side, was not seen till you were actually there. Unquestionably it was an exceedingly pretty little place, and, 'for England,' as some travelled cynics are impertinent enough to say, remarkably picturesque. The houses—cottages perhaps I should say, for such only they were in most instances—all stood along one side of a straggling 'village street,' on the other side of which the overhanging branches of the trees, planted in a thick belt to bound and conceal the private grounds of Chesney Court, made a shady pathway on the hottest summer's day, and offered a perpetual temptation to the many small birds'-nesters of the village. There was a path *inside* this plantation too, some twenty or

thirty yards back from the road ; but this was a very exclusive and aristocratic ' narrow way,' reserved for the patrician feet of ' the family,' when it pleased its members to walk to church on Sundays, instead of driving round by the road. Of late years this had often been the case; for poor Lady Chesney's Bath-chair fatigued her less than even the C springs of the yellow barouche, or her sister-in-law's low pony carriage.

Entering the village from one extreme end (by the north, as Scotch people would say; for it ran pretty nearly north and south), a short lane to the left, bordered by Chesney Woods on the one side, on the other by a very high, very venerable stone wall, led to the grand entrance to the Court. There was no avenue or approach of any sort; no lodge, even of the ordinary kind—only a gigantic iron-studded oak door, which opened in the centre. Once you had, figuratively speaking, obeyed the quaint injunction, ' Parlez au Suisse,' carved thereupon in half-illegible characters, by ringing the bell into the porter's invisible den within, straightway you were admitted literally into the courtyard itself, surrounded on two sides by the house and offices; on the third by the great wall through which you had entered; on the

fourth by thick close-growing shrubs, through which a wide gravel drive led to the front entrance. And not to the front entrance only, but to a sudden burst of beauty such as is but seldom seen, and never again forgotten. Miles away to the left rose the first low range of the grand old Clavering Hills, whose higher peaks were lost in the distance and the clouds, but which, Chesney way, sloped down gently and very gradually to the edge of the little river Swirl, which formed the boundary of Sir Robert's possessions on the east. The ground rose again from the level of the river to that of the house, and for a considerable distance in front of the windows—as far, indeed, as the eye could clearly reach—was laid out with taste and skill, enhancing, without disturbing, the original harmony of the whole scene. The house itself, half castle, half grange, was of old red sandstone; the windows sunk deep into the great thickness of the walls; the doors all iron-studded oak, like the massive entrance-gate. Everything about the dwelling itself appeared to have been originally designed with a view to endurance and defence; the contrast of this with the peacefulness and smiling gentle loveliness of the natural features of the scene was very quaint and curious, though not to the ex-

tent of producing any painful impression of incongruity. The effect of the whole was such as is seldom achieved by grander materials or more studied design. No wonder, then, that the Chesneys were proud of their beautiful old home, or that Maurice, the most sensitive of his race, never thought of it when at a distance without a strange yearning of affection ; never returned to it after an absence without a thrill of 'pleasure akin to pain.'

But Mr. Marshall and his sister saw nothing of the Court on this first expedition of theirs to Chesney. They turned to the right, when they drove suddenly into the village street, by the road, at right angles to it, leading from Easterton ; for The Feathers was as far to the south of the long straggling row of houses as the Court was to the north. Why the only 'hostel' of the place should have been set down in so seemingly out-of-the-way a position, I am unable to explain. Doubtless, however, there was some good reason for its being so, as there probably is for most things, if only we could find it out. For all I know to the contrary, there may in the old days have been a rival establishment at the other end of the village ; and I can imagine that to the unfortunates cooped up for hours in those terrible old stage-coaches, the

sight of a 'travellers' rest' of any kind would be a very welcome greeting on first entering the domains of Sir Thomas Chesney or his predecessors. Be this as it may, The Feathers was the very last house at its end of the little colony—a mile at least, by the road, from the grand entrance to the Court, though hardly so far by the path through the plantation, which brought one out in the grounds very near the front door, without going near the courtyard or passing up the lane.

The Feathers, though somewhat isolated, was not in bad company; for its next neighbour of any importance was the church, separated from it only by the old—now all but unused—churchyard; by one or two cottages, occupied by the late schoolmaster, the woman who 'cleaned and kept the key,' and other humble functionaries more or less connected with it; and by a large paddock, always let with the garden and offices of the old inn, to whomsoever might be the landlord at the time—and there had been several in the last twenty or thirty years; for as the coaches one by one dropped off, custom dropped off with them; and more than one enterprising Boniface, after a short trial of the Chesney Feathers, had thrown it up in disgust, and betaken himself to a

more appreciative neighbourhood. It was not the sort of place to degenerate into a common tavern; there was an air of profound, rather melancholy, respectability about it; and in presence of the high carved chimney-pieces, the large wide oak staircase with its shallow slippery stairs, and *the* pride of the place, an immoveable and very undesirable-looking bedstead, in which Queen Anne (why always Queen Anne?) was said to have passed a night—cries for ‘pots o’ beer,’ or rollicking choruses, would have seemed inconceivably out of place. Besides, the Chesney people were, on the whole, a remarkably sober, well-conducted set; so nobody murmured when Sir Robert’s intention of turning the old place into ‘a desirable residence for a gentleman’s family’ became known. The Rector and his wife—the latter in particular—were delighted at the prospect of obtaining ‘something in the shape of neighbours;’ for there are times when the constant society of ‘as fine a young family as you’d wish to see’ begins to pall even on a gushingly motherly, commonplace little woman of under thirty, whose charms are not yet altogether among the things of the past.

The bailiff was waiting about the door of The Feathers when the Easterton fly drew up. He came

forward instantly, and touched his cap respectfully, which Mrs. Ellison felt was as it should be.

‘It’s very rough, sir, still, you see,’ he said apologetically; for there were several men still working in the house itself, and others completing the fence which was to enclose from the road the formerly open space in front of the door. ‘The gates for the drive was to have been here last week; but there’s never no counting on them Wolding tradespeople.’

The drive, as was to be expected, was a very short one, hardly, indeed, worthy of the name; for there was but a trifling space of ground between the building and the road. But this usually great objection to a house was of very little consequence in the present case, as the real front of The Feathers was to the back, where the delicious old garden and bowling-green, whose exquisite grass was a sight to behold, were bounded by a little thicket of birches and willows, in which was hidden from sight, though not from hearing, a swiftly-flowing little brook, which babbled and chattered along like a merry child, whose overflowing mirth must find vent in some way, till, two or three miles farther on, it crept under the road, and lost itself in the waters of the beautiful Swirl.

Grey the bailiff knew what he was about, and knew too the value of first impressions. He led them at once right through the house by the old oak-panelled hall, from which all traces of 'bar' had been skilfully removed, past the polished black staircase, out by a glass door newly put up, opening right on to the bowling-green.

Even Mrs. Ellison was for a moment surprised into admiration.

'What must it be in summer!' she exclaimed.

Grey turned to answer with a gratified expression.

'You may well say so, ma'am. It's a sweet little place, this side of it, as ever were; and when all complete, and a-fitted-up throughout to match, there won't be nothing hereabouts to beat it.'

They reëntered, and Mrs. Ellison, now fairly in her element, left no corner, from dust-hole to cock-loft, unexplored. The result, on the whole, was satisfactory. The rooms, though not many in number, were fairly good-sized, and some of them capable of being made very pretty.

'I should make the drawing-room upstairs, if I were you, William,' suggested the lady; 'the large room on the left, with the little one opening out of it, which—which Miss—your wife, I should say—

would probably take a fancy to as a boodoyre for herself.'

'Or a schoolroom for Georgie,' said Mr. Marshall rashly.

'A schoolroom for *who*?' exclaimed his sister, defiant of grammar.

'For Georgie,' he repeated, feeling a little uncomfortable, though he hardly knew why,—'the younger Miss Urquhart; she is to live with us, you know.'

By a vast effort of self-control Mrs. Ellison only replied, 'Ah, indeed; I was not aware of it.' But inwardly she muttered, in mysteriously awful words, '*That* will never do;' and vowed a vow, 'not loud, but deep,' which, however, she was a much longer time than she expected of being able to put into execution.

The inspection completed, our friends prepared to return to Easterton; Mr. Marshall having received from Grey all the particulars he was authorised to give.

'And for aught else, sir,' pursued the bailiff, 'I was to ask you to write di-rect to Sir Robert. He is expected home to-morrow, and I don't think as he'll keep you waitin' for an answer. They leave in a

fortnight, and I know as he wants all settled before then.'

Mrs. Ellison was already seated in the fly, contentedly occupied in 'noting down,' in a bright scarlet pocket-book, without which she was never known to move, various particulars 'to be seen to' by William, should he become the possessor of The Feathers.

'For one thing,' she was saying to herself, 'he must certainly alter that ridiculous name. Let me see, I may just as well note down what names would be suitable. Brook-villa—there is a brook—or Brookside would do; or—stay, Laurel-green—I don't know if there are any laurels, but it really doesn't matter. Yes, Laurel-green would do very well, and no pretence about it. Surely that was the name of that sweet place the Greswolds had last summer at—Bless me, William! what's the matter?'

For Mr. Marshall, having finished his talk with Grey, was just about entering the fly, when a sudden thought struck him, and out he jumped again.

'You don't happen to know,' he began to ask Grey, out of earshot of Mrs. Ellison, however—'you don't happen to know if there is any picture of The Feathers—the other side of it, of course—to be had anywhere? Has it ever been photographed, for

instance? I have a friend who would very much like to have some idea of it—a friend at a distance—and I should exceedingly like to be able to get a picture of some kind to send to my friend.'

Grey scratched his head and considered.

'No, sir,' he said; 'I don't know of none, without they have one at the Court, which would be a big one, sir, in a frame of course, and not what you want, even if there were one, which I don't expect there be. But it seems to me I do remember something about a photography of the place. To be sure,' and his eyes brightened—'to be sure, 'twere Mr. Maurice—Mr. Chesney, I should say—as took one last summer. "Amaturing" he called it, sir, but it looked for all the world like a photography. You'd never know one from the other. And Mr. Maurice, he's very kind, sir. He'd make no manner of objection to lend it you. 'Twere a little thing—a little paper thing, as 'ud go in a letter. Shall I ask him, sir? I'll be seein' him this evenin', and 'twould save a post, if so be as you want it at onst.'

'Thank you very much,' said Mr. Marshall; 'I shall be very much obliged indeed, if you will ask about it. And be sure you beg Mr. Chesney to excuse my taking such a liberty. Perhaps you

will tell him,' he added, turning back for a moment, 'that it is for a friend who is very ill—dying, in fact—that I am so anxious to obtain the picture.'

'Yes, sir,' replied the bailiff; 'I understand, and I will explain it all right. Not that Mr. Maurice wants much explaining where there's a good turn to be done. You'll have the "amaturing," you'll see, sir, all right.'

'Thank you,' repeated Mr. Marshall; and mounting at last into the fly, drove back with his sister to Easterton.

Two days after, he received a large letter by post, containing an excellent photograph of the pretty side of The Feathers, and the following note :

'Chesney, March 15.

'MY DEAR SIR,—You are most welcome to the enclosed, though it by no means does the original justice. Grey mentioned you wished to send it to a sick friend, so pray do not think of returning it.—Yours very truly,

'MAURICE CHESNEY.'

'Very kind,' thought the lawyer to himself—'very kind indeed;' and by that evening's post the photograph was dispatched to Rochette, with the

explanation that he had obtained it 'through the kindness of Mr. Chesney.'

So the first time Eleanor ever heard Mr. Chesney's name it was with a pleasant accompaniment of gratitude to him, whoever or whatever he might be, for the kindness which had been the means of satisfying one of her mother's last wishes on earth.

'It is a dear little home,' said poor Mrs. Urquhart; 'just what I fancied for my darlings. I am so glad to have seen it. God has been very good to me!'


CHAPTER VIII.

THE LAST OF ROCHETTE.

‘But she is in her grave, and, O,
The difference to me!’

She dwelt among the untrodden ways.

Six weeks later, when May was setting in, and poor Nelly had begun to fancy it possible that the universal revival of nature might bring with it a message of reprieve—reprieve only; she did not delude herself with hoping for more—to the individual life she was cherishing so devotedly, the summons came. It reached Mr. Marshall one morning, by the same post which brought him news of the last of the alterations being completed at his new house at Chesney, which was therefore now nearly ready for his occupation. This letter he opened first, seeing it was connected with business of some kind, and throwing it aside with a smile, proceeded to read Eleanor’s in



a more deliberate fashion. He anticipated nothing more than the usual, 'Mamma is much the same,' or, 'We have had a pretty comfortable week;' for the little bride-elect wrote dutifully every week, and this was just about the day when her letters generally made their appearance. But the moment he caught sight of the contents of this letter, Mr. Marshall started. It is *always* startling when it comes, however long expected; almost more so, perhaps, in one sense, to the less closely concerned of the anxious watchers round the fading form, than to those nearest and dearest, whose agony stuns them for a time into utter incapacity of realising the truth.

Eleanor wrote calmly—too calmly almost. Poor child, she had come to believe she *did* realise it; and, deceived by the continuance of the self-control she had so fought for, imagined she had passed the worst. She did not know—how could her eighteen peaceful years have taught her to know?—some of the bitter secrets of suffering; that it is, in a sense, *easy* to be strong and calm while yet there is anything to do for the loved one—any service to render—any possible mitigation of the suffering we cannot remove. She did not know the 'afterwards' of all this—the blank despair of saying 'There is nothing

more to do—no use now in checking tears or forcing smiles ; it is *all over*.’

This was her simple little letter :

‘MY DEAR MR. MARSHALL,—There is a change in dear mamma, and she begs me to ask you to come as was agreed. Monsieur Latour says we must not deceive ourselves ; it cannot be long. She says I am to tell you she is very comfortable. She only wants to see you here. I do not know what to do with poor Georgie. I cannot make her understand about mamma ; she seems bewildered ; but she is very good and obedient, and she asks me to send you her love. Please let me know how soon you can be here.—Yours affectionately,

‘ELEANOR URQUHART.’

It was the last time but one she ever signed her maiden name. Less than a week found Mr. Marshall again at Rochette ; and the very day after his arrival, all preliminaries having been arranged by Monsieur Montluc, the marriage took place ; for there was no time to lose, if the last wish of the dying woman were to be gratified. It was a strange wedding for a girl of eighteen ; but in her supreme preoccupation,


Eleanor did not feel it to be so. She was hardly conscious of her own existence just then ; she herself, Mr. Marshall, everybody appeared to her merged in the one feeble life slowly ebbing away ; and beyond or independently of this one absorbing interest, she was for the time utterly incapable of thinking or feeling. Physically, too, she was all but worn-out : the strain on her whole system had been great and protracted ; it could not have lasted much longer, nor was it required to do so. Mrs. Urquhart died in the afternoon of the same day that made her poor Nelly a wife.

* * * * *

A very few days were all it was then possible for Mr. Marshall to remain at Rochette. He only waited till the funeral was over, to say good-bye again for a time to the poor child, who had not yet thought or cared to think of herself as a wife. He was very kind to her—kind and considerate as a father might have been ; and so far as she was capable of feeling anything, she felt grateful ; all the more that it never seemed to strike him that he was doing anything to deserve gratitude, or that just then anybody's feelings were to be taken into account but hers. A more sensitive man would probably have been less unself-

ish, or rather self-forgetful, than the middle-aged unromantic lawyer; and after all, there are times when it is a relief to have to do with very matter-of-fact people—people who are content to take things as they find them, and think it natural that grief should for a time so prostrate and absorb, that they, and their claims on attention, should find themselves in the background. Failing the support and consolation of that rarest of blessings—perfect all-comprehending sympathy—there are stages of suffering in which simple kindness, which attempts and professes to be nothing more than what it is, is more grateful and acceptable to the freshly-wounded spirit than under other circumstances would be believed.

Eleanor's self-absorption, however, was so essentially foreign to her real nature, so entirely a temporary weakness, though of its kind unavoidable, that she quickly began to rally from its influence; and even during the few days which intervened between her mother's death and Mr. Marshall's departure, occasional pricks of self-reproach made themselves felt. These increased in frequency and sharpness as the time for his leaving drew nearer; and the last evening, when he came to Le



Doux Repos to say good-bye, the intensity of her mingled feelings broke forth at last in a fit of passionate uncontrollable weeping. She had cried before—cried, indeed, almost incessantly, but gently and softly, broken-heartedly—in the sense that a very young person's tears *can* be called broken-hearted—but without passion, without bitterness. Now the cooped-up agony broke out, all the more violently from the mingling of these new sensations of self-reproach. Mr. Marshall was startled and distressed, and utterly at a loss what to do or say. They were alone at the time; Eleanor lying on a sofa in the little sitting-room, which had been appropriated to her mother's use in the first years of their residence at Le Doux Repos, before Mrs. Urquhart was too feeble to move up and down stairs; and the room was endeared to the girl as the scene of much innocent and light-hearted happiness. It was only the second time poor Nelly had been allowed to come downstairs; for her extreme prostration had at first threatened to culminate in actual illness. But these two days she had been decidedly better, which rendered this unexpectedly violent agitation all the more grievous and perplexing to one so totally unaccustomed to the inconsistencies of even the best of womankind as

poor Mr. Marshall. He tried hard to soothe her by such little commonplaces as, 'My dear Eleanor, you will really make yourself ill;' or, 'Try to control yourself, my dear; you distress me;' which only made her sob the harder. At last he suggested fetching Madame Montluc or Miss Jennings; and either in horror of his doing so, or that by this time she had sobbed herself into such a state of exhaustion that she could sob no more, the poor child grew calmer, and began to assure him she would be 'quite good and quiet,' if he would not call anybody.

'That is right, my dear,' he said approvingly, in very much the same tone he would have used to a little child who was trying to do as it was told; 'that is right, my dear. I fear you must have over-fatigued yourself in some way; but a good night's rest will do you good. I must be going soon, and I am glad to see you better before I leave. It distressed me exceedingly to see you so overcome.'

'O, I am so sorry—so very, very sorry!' said Eleanor penitently; 'it is that which is making me so additionally unhappy, Mr. Marshall. I do feel I have behaved so badly to you! After all your kindness, your great kindness; your coming so quickly too, and at such inconvenience; and all out of your good-

ness to us—to *her*. O, I am so grateful; and yet I have done nothing but selfishly shut myself up with my sorrow. But please, dear Mr. Marshall, please believe how grateful I am; *please* do!’

The situation was a curious one. It is not often that a bride, and a bride of eighteen, is at a loss for words sufficiently to express her gratitude to her husband for having married her. Mr. Marshall was too matter-of-fact fully to appreciate the mingled humour and pathos of the little scene; but even he began to realise, as he never before had done, the extreme youthfulness, the unconventionality and single-mindedness of this poor little girl he had made his wife. She looked younger and more child-like than usual as she lay there on the sofa, covered up with shawls, her dark hair simply twisted into a knot, instead of coiled round and round her head in the glossy plaits her mother had loved to see; her eyes deepened, though not disfigured, by the many tears they had lately shed; for she had those rare eyes, so seldom believed in by those who have not seen them for themselves, which are never so lovely, so dewy and wistfully tender, as after violent weeping. And just now, as these eyes gazed up beseechingly in his face, the lawyer was moved to an un-

wanted display of tenderness. He stooped down, and with gentle hands turned the poor little pale face so that he could see it still more clearly, and then kissed it with genuine emotion. It was only the second time he had ever done so. There had seemed no leisure, even had there been capacity or inclination, for any of the ordinary pretty or playful accompaniments of betrothal in their strange sad courtship; and even had there been no sorrowful preoccupation, the great disparity of years would naturally have led to their manner towards each other being unusually matter-of-fact and undemonstrative. But Nelly was pleased when Mr. Marshall kissed her so kindly; it made her think, after all, he could not be very vexed with her.

‘My dear child,’ he said kindly, very kindly, but gravely, ‘you must never speak so. It was not good or unselfish of me to choose for myself such a dear little wife as I never had dared to hope for; and it certainly would be very, very bad of me, if I did not do all I can to make her happy.’

‘I know that,’ said Eleanor, but very dejectedly still. ‘I mean, I know you *like* to be good to me; but that does not make it any better. It seems all on your side; and I feel so strange now, as if I could

do nothing more for anybody, and didn't care, in a selfish horrid kind of way.'

'That is only because you have been ill,' said Mr. Marshall, at a loss how else to reply to her contradictory confession; 'you will soon feel different, and there will be plenty for you to do when you come to Chesney. There will be the house to arrange. I shall not complete the furnishing till you are there, so that you may help to choose it. That reminds me, I was thinking it will be some weeks before it will be quite fit for us, and I would rather take you straight there than to Easterton. So if I can get away for a holiday in two or three weeks from now, when I return here to fetch you and Georgie, I was thinking we might make a little tour instead of going straight home. It may be long before I can get a holiday again, and you would like it, would you not?'

'O yes, very much, thank you,' said Eleanor, trying her best to look pleased and interested; 'I have not seen much of Switzerland, except just about here. Yes, thank you, I shall like it very much; though what I shall like *best*, I think,' she added with a half-timid smile, as if fearful of appearing ungrateful for the proposed tour, 'what I am look-

ing forward to, is that dear little house you have got for us. It will be so sweet and quiet, and mamma loved the country in England so. It will remind me of her so. O, how glad I am she saw the picture of it! I am sure I shall like Chesney, Mr. Marshall.'

He looked gratified; and the little effort to please him by speaking cheerfully rewarded Nelly, by making her feel somewhat less lonely and dejected.

'You must make haste to get strong, then,' he said encouragingly, 'or we shall have Monsieur Latour forbidding you to travel for ever so long. I suppose Georgie will be contented to stay here for a short time, and we can call for her again on our way. By the bye, what has she been doing with herself lately? I have hardly seen her.'

Nelly's face flushed, and she started slightly.

'O, I have been very wicked in my selfishness!' she exclaimed. 'The first day or two I felt so stupid and strange, I could hardly bear any one in the room; and Georgie cried so, Madame sent her downstairs, not to disturb me. How cruel I must have seemed to her! I daresay Monsieur and Adèle have been kind to her; but my poor little Georgie! O, Mr. Marshall, please tell them to send her to me.'

‘Very well, my dear ; but don’t let her tire you,’ he replied, though inwardly reproaching himself for the thoughtlessness which had allowed him to mention Georgie in this way to her sister, still so weak and excitable. ‘I have no doubt she is quite happy; children’s grief is short-lived, and it was necessary to keep you quiet.’

Eleanor said no more ; but her anxiety having been aroused, she felt restless and uneasy till able to judge for herself of her little sister’s well-being. Shortly after, Mr. Marshall said good-bye, and for a few minutes Nelly was left alone. She was just beginning to fear her message had been forgotten, and to meditate creeping across the room to ring the bell, when a tap at the door, followed by some fumbling at the handle, a rather awkward one to turn, told her that Georgie had been allowed to come to her.

‘Come in, darling ; I am much better,’ she cried ; and the little girl came towards her gently.

She had been so often warned not to distress or agitate her sister,—and Nelly looked so strange and unfamiliar, lying there on the sofa, at first sight, to Georgie’s inexperienced eyes, nearly as white and ill as ‘poor mamma’ herself,—that she

hardly dared approach her closely. But a loving glance from Nelly's dear eyes, outstretched arms, and a tearful whispered 'Georgie, my own Georgie!' and the sisters were clasped in each other's arms, kissing and cooing over each other as if it was weeks since they had been together. Never before perhaps had Eleanor so realised their loss; yet her tears were now soft and gentle. The clinging grasp of the little creature, to whom she must henceforth be parents and sister in one, woke in her the intense maternal devotion latent in every woman.

'O my Georgie, my darling!' she murmured; 'I have nobody in the world but you now' (poor Mr. Marshall!); 'why have you stayed away from me all these days?'

'I thought you did not want me, Nelly,' said the child, half sobbing as she spoke; 'and, O, I have been so unhappy! Madame was so angry with me for crying so in your room that morning—the first morning after they said dear mamma was dead. She scolded me so, and said I had done you a great deal of harm, and they wouldn't let me go back to you. They said you were ill; and I thought you were going to die too. And they said almost worse than that.'

‘What, darling?’ asked Nelly, stroking Georgie’s cheek as she waited for her reluctant answer.

‘O, it was like that day I first heard you were going to marry Mr. Marshall, and I said it made me hate him. Madame and Miss Jennings said to me, when I cried to go to you, that I must not expect you to care as much for me now that you are married and have Mr. Marshall. And, O, Nelly, I have been trying to like him; but I *can’t*, if that is true. Is it true? Do people always care most, *very, very most*, for their husbands? I asked Adèle; and she said she didn’t know—she supposed they did, but she had never been married. I couldn’t ask Monsieur, for he has been so busy, I have hardly seen him at all. I thought I shouldn’t like to ask you; but when I see you, Nelly, and you hold me so, I can’t help telling all, every bit, about what has made me so unhappy. Do you know, Nelly,’ she went on, lowering her voice, ‘I have been almost more unhappy about thinking you were going to leave off loving me, than about mamma. Do tell me if it is true that you love Mr. Marshall most now?’

The very faintest colour rose in Nelly’s face, the reason of which she herself could not have defined.

‘Do people always care the very, very most for their husbands?’ asked Georgie in her innocence.

And the words somehow stirred for the first time in the young girl’s heart a vague unacknowledged misgiving. It did not remain there long enough, however, to distress her; other feelings soon lulled it to sleep, and its slumber lasted long.

‘I can’t tell you much about other people and their husbands, you silly little darling,’ she replied lovingly. ‘I can only tell you that twenty husbands could not make *me* love *you* the least tiniest bit less. Mr. Marshall is very, very kind; and what he is kindest of all in, is in getting us a dear little home where we can always be together. O, Georgie dear, it is very silly of people to put such nonsense in your head; but it is still sillier of you to believe it. How many times must I tell you, that if it hadn’t been for my marrying Mr. Marshall, we could not have been sure of staying together? I might have had to be a governess, and you would have been sent to school. And I thought you were beginning to get over your dislike to Mr. Marshall.’

The last words were spoken regretfully, and went straight to Georgie’s heart.

‘O, Nelly, I will be good ; indeed, indeed I didn’t mean to be naughty about that again,’ she exclaimed. ‘I don’t dislike Mr. Marshall, and I never have been the least bit rude to him since the day I promised you I wouldn’t. Only everything has been so strange just now ; mamma going away made it seem as if you were going away too. And anybody leaving off loving would be a worse going away than dying, wouldn’t it, Nelly ? For though it makes me cry dreadfully to think I can’t see mamma for such a very long time, still I can sometimes fancy she sees us, and loves us just the same. Can’t you, Nelly ? Most of all when I’m looking at the stars. Last night there was one beauty peeping in at the window ; and if only I had been sitting with my arms round you this way, I should have fancied it was mamma looking down at us.’

Nelly’s only answer was to clasp her more closely. In a few minutes she spoke again to the child on the old subject.

‘Then, Georgie dear,’ she said, ‘you’ll promise me, won’t you, never to get these silly fancies into your head, not even if foolish people say things like what you told me ? I don’t think it would be difficult for you to like Mr. Marshall, if you remember

it is owing to him we are able to stay together, as dear mother wished us.'

'I do like him already for that,' replied the little girl eagerly. 'Indeed I never really disliked him, not in a bad way, you know, as if he had been cruel or unkind, like—like—' she stopped, at a loss for an example of sufficiently atrocious cruelty—'like Bluebeard, or the aunt in the *Wide, wide World*. I always knew he was good; and I don't mind his not being very pretty, if you don't, Nelly?' with a glance of perfectly sincere inquiry into her sister's face. 'I only don't like him because—because—he doesn't like little girls—I think that must be why. He's not like Monsieur; for though Monsieur is quite as old, and even uglier, he likes little girls, and he likes the same sorts of things they do. Monsieur's head is quite full of fairy tales, Nelly; such lots, you can't fancy. You haven't heard half; and I am sure he likes them just as much as I do. And *he* likes games too, and picnics in the wood; and the stars, and the moon, and all my favourite things. It is very funny, isn't it, Nelly, how different people are?'

'Very funny,' agreed Eleanor, who was lying back with her eyes closed, smiling faintly at her little

sister's confidences. 'I am afraid, Georgie, you will have to make up your mind to like Mr. Marshall without converting him to your tastes. We must make the best of things as they are. You see, I couldn't have married Monsieur, could I, though he does know so many fairy tales?'

'No; you couldn't,' said Georgie, in perfect good faith, 'because of Madame. Besides, he's dreadfully old. I shouldn't wonder if he was fifty. But, Nelly, it is time for me to go to bed; and Madame will scold me if I have tired you. Have I tired you? No? O, I am so glad! I am nearly quite happy again, Nelly, now I have had such a nice talk, and you are not going to leave off loving me.'

And, with the buoyancy of her age, she all but skipped out of the room that half an hour before she had entered so dejectedly. But in a moment she was back again, creeping in softly, however; for a new mood was on her again.

'Nelly,' she whispered, as she put her arms once more round her sister's neck, 'I forgot to ask you something. Just now, when I said I was nearly quite happy again, I almost forgot about mamma; and when I passed the door of her room, her dear room, I remembered, and I ran down again. O,

Nelly!’ and a convulsive sob shook the little frame, ‘I wanted to ask you, Nelly,’ she went on after a short pause, ‘is it naughty to ask God to give my love to mamma every night when I say my prayers? I asked Adèle; and she said she didn’t think it was, but I’d better ask you. Is it naughty?’

‘No, dearest, no,’ said Eleanor, clasping her again to her, and kissing the lovely tearful face; ‘of course it is not naughty. Nothing like that *can* be naughty. Now, good-night again, darling. Soon, I hope, I shall be quite strong again; and then I shall dress and undress you myself as usual.’

When she had gone, Eleanor lay back again, feeling tired and exhausted. For the time she had felt refreshed by Georgie’s chattering; but she was still so weak, that a reaction of increased dejection already set in. There were dark hours at this time that she had to pass through, poor girl; dark, and yet far from the darkest a nature like hers was capable of knowing; for there entered into their sorrow no shadow of self-reproach.

‘I think, I do think I made her happy,’ she repeated to herself. ‘Her last words blessed me. But, O, except for my little Georgie, how I wish I could have gone with her!’

Still, though she was unconscious of it, and would have been indignant at the bare idea, the wound was already beginning to heal; the fresh healthy young nature was already reasserting its power; for there are few griefs which leave an ineffaceable scar at eighteen. And Eleanor had the comfort and support of knowing that she had still some one to live for: a matchless medicine for a true woman, strong in devotion, in whatever else she may be weak.

Notwithstanding the depression of this evening, however, Eleanor was decidedly better the next morning; and in a week or two was able to send a very good account of her health to Mr. Marshall, who accordingly hastened his arrangements for the promised holiday. Nelly would not have been sorry had the idea of the tour been abandoned; but seeing that her husband was looking forward to it with pleasure, she tried her best to enter into it cheerfully. But she shrank from leaving Georgie for even two or three weeks; and she had an almost nervous eagerness to get over the pain of parting with Rochette and its many associations, and to enter upon the new life, in which she felt sure her mother's blessing would accompany her. Most, if not all, of these

mingled feelings she kept to herself. The time for her was past of perfect certainty of sympathy from any human being; and failing this, her nature, reserved though not secretive, in all purely personal feelings or interests withdrew instinctively into itself, and there began to live a life of its own. She did not realise this, or speculate about it to herself; she only thought simply, 'Mamma is gone; and I suppose no one ever does understand one as thoroughly as a mother. Well, I must do without being thoroughly understood.' And it was not till long afterwards that she became conscious of the meaning of her own words; not till the strong deep woman within her woke to the full knowledge of its own powers of loving and suffering and *living*, did she recognise far behind her the fact, that with her own innocent hands she had barred the gate against herself, rendered that a sin which should have been the fruition and completion of her existence. But just now, at eighteen, with all her experience of suffering, her power of self-denial and self-control, her quaint little womanly ways and real *latent* womanliness, Eleanor Marshall was to all intents and purposes a child.

There were, as there always are at such times, a

crowd of little arrangements to be made at the last, which wholesomely interfered with overmuch leave-taking—at least, of inanimate objects of affection. Nelly had promised herself a solitary walk through her favourite woods the day before that on which Mr. Marshall was again expected; but a farewell visit from her friend Madame de la Vigne (the Professor's young wife) perhaps fortunately prevented her carrying out her project. Pauline de la Vigne was the only one of her acquaintances at Rochette to whom Eleanor felt she must say good-bye in person; and Madame Montluc had been not a little horrified at the young bride proposing to go herself to see her friend in her pretty little house.

'It was not to be thought of,' said Madame, a great stickler for *les convenances*. 'A *nouvelle mariée* to go to see her friends before they had been to see her! That might be the custom in England, perhaps; it certainly was not so at Rochette.'

'But I am not like a *nouvelle mariée*, dear Madame,' said Nelly; 'it is all so different. And you know Pauline and all my friends would have come to *féliciter* me long ago, had it not been for this,' and she touched her black dress.

'Well, for that then, if for no other reason,' said

the good lady, dexterously shifting her ground, 'it would not be *convenable* at all for Madame Maréchale to go out of her own residence for the time. That Pauline may give herself airs if she chooses' (the truth was, Madame was a little jealous of her niece's marriage to a man of such high standing in the college as M. le Professeur de la Vigne); 'but she shall be taught to treat *my* guests with all the respect possible; and *dans les premiers deuils*, no one thinks of paying visits.'

So, unwilling to make a discussion on this new ground, Eleanor agreed to Madame's proposal, that Madame de la Vigne should be asked to come to bid her friend farewell at Le Doux Repos. Poor Pauline, as good-hearted and unassuming a little woman as ever lived, was only too delighted to avail herself of the invitation; only, as ill-luck would have it, she made her appearance the very afternoon Nelly had kept free for her farewell to the woods. But she was really glad to see Pauline; indeed, she would have been hard to please had she felt otherwise; and she felt, too, a new species of fellowship with her old friend, now that their lots in life were in one important respect so similar. She had a half feeling that somehow Pauline's marriage had had to do with

her own ; certainly it had paved the way for it, by accustoming her mind to the idea of a young girl marrying a man fully old enough to be her father ; so that Mr. Marshall's unexpected proposal had struck her with no repulsion or feeling of incongruity. And Pauline's marriage had turned out so well, every one said ! As Eleanor rose to greet her friend, she regarded her with a new feeling of strong interest, and a vague idea passed through her mind in the moment, that she might perhaps succeed in obtaining a few useful hints.

Pauline was a pretty little woman ; her eyes deep velvety brown, with tears, genuine of their kind, always ready at command ; her nose and mouth charming, though diminutive ; her creamy complexion and thick dark-brown hair setting the whole off to great advantage. Figure she had none ; but somehow in looking at her one did not feel inclined to be critical. She had dear fat little hands, a sweet caressing tone of voice, and a dear good little heart. She came into the room with tears not only in her eyes but running down her cheeks, threw her arms round Nelly, and kissed her fervently on both sides of her face.

'Adieu, Nellee, adieu !' she cried, quaintly employing the word as is usual in Switzerland, as a

greeting; though to English ears it is associated only with farewell. 'Ah, my child, how have I suffered for thee! My poor, my very poor Nellie!' But our talk must not be all sad. I must kiss thee again, my little one'—and she suited the action to the word, stretching up a tremendous way to reach 'her little one'—'for joy; to think thou hast a husband already, thou who wast my *amie de nocce, il y a si peu de mois.*'

It was the first opportunity she had had of congratulating her friend; for the Professor and she had been absent from Rochette during the few weeks of Eleanor's engagement. So they had plenty to talk about. Some few simple details of her mother's last days, Nelly to her surprise found herself drawn into telling to her gentle little friend—the tears in the great soft brown eyes had something to say to it, probably—but the touching on the subject, however slightly, did the poor child good, and somewhat relieved the desolate feeling at her heart. Pauline's 'Ah's, and 'O mon Dieu, que tu as donc souffert's, and 'pauvre petite's, were so tender and soothing, that Nelly almost began to think she had done the little lady injustice in considering her devoid of deep feeling. Any way, her quick tact and impression-

ability did as well as deep feeling for the time. Then they talked of Eleanor's future home; and Pauline said she should give Théodore no peace till he took her to see England, and to pay her friend a visit.

'Théodore!' repeated Eleanor in surprise; 'why, Pauline, you told me you were sure you could never call Monsieur de la Vigne by his first name. When I was staying with you only a few months ago, you always said Monsieur le Professeur.'

'Did I?' said Pauline carelessly. 'Well, my dear, one changes, you see. I was at the first perhaps the very least in the world afraid of my husband; but now you see it is different. I am everything to him. He says it is like being in a new world. Why, my dear, his clothes, his food, all the arrangements, depend on me; and feeling this, of course I can no longer feel any awe of the dear man. O, we suit wonderfully! He adores me, and yet he makes fun of me too. I assure you, in the evenings when he reads too long, I come behind his chair and snatch his book out of his hand before he sees I am there—ah, it would kill you with laughing! Then, again, I climb up on to his knees and knock those spectacles off his nose before he can say, *Petite chatte!*'

Eleanor looked aghast.

‘But, Pauline, the Professor is so clever, so learned,’ she remonstrated.

‘Ah, yes, he is learned,’ said Pauline with wifely pride, ‘one of the most learned; but for other things, *pour les affaires*, he is a child. But so amiable, so charming; I am indeed fortunate! And you, I doubt not, my Nellee, will be the same. Mr. Marshall, without doubt, is very *gentil*. And you will quickly learn to treat him as I do my Théodore; and he will look to you for everything, and you will be his *petite chatte*.’

Pauline rose to go as she spoke; so Eleanor did not require to answer her last observations, which certainly did not contain hints of the kind she had half hoped for. She was conscious of not being the sort of person to be called *petite chatte* by any one, and assuredly not by Mr. Marshall; nor could she in her wildest dreams imagine herself addressing him as William, or climbing on to his knees and knocking off his spectacles. She would try to be a good wife to him, in her own way; but she felt exceedingly thankful that, to his calm matter-of-fact disposition, any playful nonsense of the kind her friend had been describing would be as distasteful as to herself.

‘I couldn’t possibly have married him if he had been any less sedate and sensible than he is,’ she said to herself, with a little shake, half of annoyance, half of amusement, as Madame de la Vigne left her, after a really affectionate farewell; ‘I can’t understand Pauline, but I suppose everybody is different from everybody else.’

Still her reflections were followed by a vague little sigh. Her friend did look very happy; and, after all, it must be rather nice to have a husband one *could* call ‘Théodore.’

CHAPTER IX.

MRS. MARSHALL AND EASTERTON DO NOT GET ON.

‘The why is plain as way to parish church.’

As You like it.

CHESNEY was in its greatest beauty when our little party of travellers arrived at The Feathers late one afternoon about the middle of July. They were tired and hot and dusty, and exceedingly glad to be at the end of their long journey; for they had lingered in Switzerland till Mr. Marshall's holiday had all but expired, and in consequence of this, had travelled more expeditiously than was altogether agreeable, once their faces were turned homewards. But Eleanor was just as well pleased to get over the ground quickly; for she was in no mood to care about shopping in Paris, or bathing at Boulogne; and far from sorry that, owing to Mrs. Ellison's being away at the seaside, the two or three days they could not other-

wise have avoided spending in her house had dwindled down to one night at a hotel. As for Georgie, she was too delighted to be again under her sister's wing to make difficulties of any kind; and she was really, when she chose, for her years, a most sensible and well-conducted little damsel. Her elderly brother-in-law's opinion of her rose considerably; and Nelly's occasional misgivings as to the amiability of the relations between the two began to disappear. They were all three feeling very amiable just then, and could afford to be philosophical over a little heat and dust, and to speak of them as trifling discomforts which would but make 'home' all the pleasanter when they got there. Mr. Marshall had never been so happy in his life. He had enjoyed his tour immensely, and could not help now and then drawing mental comparisons between his present travelling companion and the only other woman he had ever had an opportunity of judging of in similar circumstances, by no means favourable to the latter. Mrs. Ellison was just the sort of person to appear in her very worst light, once she had set foot across the Channel. She travelled with a maid even more disagreeable than herself; a pile of luggage, thanks to which she succeeded in dressing herself each day in

a more glaringly hideous costume than that of the day before ; and a pet dog, who always slept in the kitchen at home, but in foreign parts was promoted to the honour of guarding his mistress's couch at night, and snapping at every one that came near her during the day. She thought it her bounden duty to answer abruptly and uncivilly whenever she was spoken to ; insisted on her bed being pulled to pieces, in the presence of the insulted chamber-maids of the best hotel in Paris, before she would get into it ; and honestly believed all Frenchmen with whom she came in contact were in league to cheat and swindle her ; and, though a sensible, clear-headed, and not ill-natured person in her own country, across the water she became a very silly and objectionable old woman. Her brother had escorted her twice to Paris and back, and felt no desire for a third experience of the kind, but nevertheless put it down, in his matter-of-fact way, greatly to his ignorance of ladies and their eccentricities.

Travelling with Nelly, however, was a very different story ; above all, with a Nelly dutifully determined to do all in her power to please him, to lose no opportunity of practically expressing her deep-lying gratitude for his ' great goodness.' She gave

him no trouble ; knowing his small experience of her sex, she resolved to spare him every possible annoyance ; she seemed to have hardly any luggage, and yet she was always prettily dressed ; her sweet voice and gentle manner—possibly, too, her perfect French and German—secured them a civil reception wherever for the time they pitched their tent ; in short, she was simply perfection ; and Mr. Marshall, as I said, had never been so happy in his life. He was in no hurry to abridge his holiday, and Eleanor took care to give no sign of her longing to have Georgie in her arms again, of her great wish to be peacefully settled in the English country home she had learnt to look forward to as a sort of haven.

‘ We must come abroad again, my dear, another year, if I can manage it,’ Mr. Marshall had said to her one evening just before they returned to Rochette to pick up Georgie ; ‘ this little tour has been so very pleasant. It is a pity I am so tied by business.’

‘ I am very glad, very glad indeed, you have enjoyed it,’ said Eleanor ; ‘ but I am quite sure, when we are once at home in that dear little house at Chesney, we shall be in no hurry to leave it.’

Which speech only made Mr. Marshall congratulate himself the more on his wonderful discrimina-

tion in the choice of a wife. She certainly did not amuse herself by knocking his spectacles off his nose, nor was she any nearer calling him 'William' than she had been the first time they met; but nothing she could have done could have added to his content; his cup was full of calm unimpassioned happiness, worthy and real of its kind, though by wider and deeper natures apt to be despised.

No attendant circumstances could have shown The Feathers to greater advantage, or rendered the first impression of it more attractive, than that hot July afternoon, and the long journey in the brilliant sunshine, during which the admiration Eleanor could not but feel for the smiling beauty of the country through which they passed was tempered by an intense longing for coolness and shade.

'I had no idea it was often so hot in England,' she said, as they drove along the high road from the wayside station some miles south of Easterton, where they had left the railway. 'Georgie darling, are you *very* tired?' she whispered to her sister; for the little face was growing weary and the blue eyes suspiciously heavy. But before the child could answer, the carriage stopped suddenly, and Nelly could hardly believe they had reached their destination; for they

had driven into Chesney by The Feathers end, and their own house was therefore the first they came to.

‘Here we are, my dear; here we are at last,’ said Mr. Marshall, as he handed them out of the carriage, and led the way with a formal little air of proprietorship. His own old servant Betsey (a meek soul, to whom it had never occurred to object to the introduction of a mistress into her hitherto uninterfered-with domain) opened the door, or, rather, stood at the door, bobbing gently, as if she were afflicted with a peculiar form of St. Vitus’s dance, and with white-satin ribbons in her neat old-fashioned cap. Her master passed her with a nod, but Eleanor’s quick eyes caught sight of the glimmer of the white satin. It was the first little pitiful attempt at anything bridal-like in connection with her marriage, and, coming upon it so suddenly and unexpectedly, it touched her greatly—in the strange, disproportionate way in which a mere trifle, a very commonplace trifle even, will sometimes stir up great depths of thought and feeling. She stopped, and, standing there in her deep mourning, as unlike a bride as can be imagined, looked down kindly at poor Betsey, still bobbing away perseveringly, and putting out her hand, held the old servant’s for a moment in


its grasp. 'Thank you,' was all she said; but the two words did their work.

Little Georgie, following behind, still half confused and a little sleepy, but quick to take a hint, stopped too, and attracted by the pleasant expression Nelly's kindly act had called forth on the homely face, simply and sweetly, but all the same with the indescribable little *air de grande dame* which never forsook her, lifted up her lovely face to be kissed.

'Bless you, my dear!' murmured Betsey, which encouraged poor Georgie to make a request.

'I am *so* thirsty,' she said; 'will you have the goodness to give me a cup of milk?'

So Betsey trotted off with her to the kitchen, leaving Eleanor alone with her husband to make their first acquaintance with their new home. Mr. Marshall had profited by Grey's example, and would hardly allow Eleanor to do more than glance at the deliciously cool darkness of the polished oak hall, and the wide shallow staircase, before he led her out through the glass-door to the terrace overlooking the garden. It was now in its perfection; the green of the lawn exquisitely refreshing to the eye; the old-fashioned rose-hedge a mass of fragrance and colour, all glowing and smiling in the rich softness of the mid-



summer afternoon ; and down below, at the foot of the slope, the murmur of the brook, hidden in the little thicket, adding its welcome suggestion of coolness and shade.

‘ O, how delicious, how beautiful !’ cried Eleanor, with effusion. ‘ O, Mr. Marshall, I had no idea it was half so lovely. How happy we shall be here ! How good of you to find such a lovely place !’

And she turned towards him with the fresh delight and gratitude of a child, holding out both her hands in her eagerness. He took them in his, and then kissed her glowing face, looking, as he felt, really pleased with her pleasure.

‘ You see it at its best just now,’ he said, taking refuge in this little depreciation of what in a sense was a gift from him to her, to escape from the sort of awkwardness a shy person always feels on being thanked. ‘ I don’t know that you will like it as well in winter.’

But ‘ O yes, I shall,’ replied Eleanor stoutly. ‘ It is my home, and whatever it had been, I should have liked it ; but as it is, it would be quite impossible not to love it and be happy in it.’

Then Georgie appeared, so much the better for her cup of milk, that she had begged another for

her sister, an attention Nelly fully appreciated ; and then they made a progress through the house, all the arrangements of which Mrs. Marshall declared to be perfectly to her mind. But then—and then—they began to realise how tired they were ; and after a mongrel meal, half dinner, half tea, supposed by women to be the proper thing on such occasions, and which Georgie was almost too sleepy to eat, they all confessed to being very thankful they had not another journey before them for the next day ; and Georgie at last fairly gave in, and begged to be allowed to go to bed.

So life at the old Feathers began under the most favourable auspices.

Mr. Marshall drove to Easterton early the next morning, and did not return home till six in the evening. This was to be the rule of his days, Sundays of course, and occasional rare holidays, excepted ; but there was no fear of her finding it dull, Eleanor assured him—there was ‘ plenty to do for some time to come in arranging things ;’ and when that was all done, there would be sure to be something else to amuse themselves with ; besides, by then they would be feeling quite at home. The ‘ arranging things’ was pleasant work ; the house

was not yet completely furnished ; and once or twice a week through the summer, Mr. Marshall *made* a holiday on which to drive his wife over to Wolding, to exercise her own taste in the articles chosen. Then, too, she from time to time secured the services of the village carpenter to work under her own directions, here and there putting up a convenient shelf or a pretty bracket ; for in one of the old attics Nelly found a number of treasures, in the shape of broken pieces of richly-carved old oak, which her quick ingenuity turned to good purpose. She had naturally neat fingers and good taste, and the latter had been cultivated insensibly by residence in countries where simple prettiness is not so rare as in England, and where beauty is not measured by cost. So she and little Georgie were really happy in their innocent way. The new cares and responsibilities of housekeeping came very softly on Eleanor ; Betsey's heart she had gained from the first, and her two young underlings, pleasant-faced country girls, naturally followed suit, and thought there had never been a sweeter mistress.


After a week or two, there came a few visitors ; ' the Bulders, the Clubbers, and the Snipes ' of Easterton, moved thereto chiefly, no doubt, by curiosity,

made their way in detachments to Chesney to pay a formal call on the lawyer's young wife, who had dropped so unexpectedly from no one exactly knew where. She received them simply and courteously ; but when the first commonplaces with which English people of a certain class always inaugurate an acquaintance were exhausted, the conversation became somewhat arduous. There were plenty of things Nelly could have talked about, had she not felt instinctively they would not have been understood ; there were many questions her guests would very much have liked to ask, but something in her manner of meeting the first skirmishers of this kind sent out, effectually repulsed farther attack.

' You have lived a great deal abroad, I believe, Mrs. Marshall ? ' hazarded one Easterton matron ; but Eleanor's ' Yes, I have, ' was not encouraging. She had no wish to repulse or offend ; she was the very last person in the world to suppose that there *could* be such a thing as ' giving herself airs ; ' there were no secrets in her life, and but for recent associations, she would have been very glad to tell them anything they cared to hear about Rochette and the Rochettais ; but just yet, any allusion to her life there, any touching on personal interests, made her quiver, and this

most natural sensitiveness shielded itself behind a coldness and dryness of manner, for all its gentleness pretty certain to be misunderstood by people of only ordinary discernment. Georgie's presence once or twice on these occasions did not mend matters. She took her cue with even undesirable sharpness from her sister's manner, and *the* gossip of Easterton, who had set out on a pilgrimage to Chesney with an avowed determination of succeeding where others had failed, in finding out 'something about this French girl Mr. Marshall had picked up,' 'got it,' to use a school-boy phrase, from *notre petite demoiselle* rather 'hotter and stronger' than she had anticipated. There were two or three ladies in the room on the afternoon in question—for various reasons, among others the clubbing for a fly, it suited the Easterton matrons to do their hunting in couples—and Eleanor was really tired with her vain efforts to entertain her guests and to evade Miss Fanshawe's disagreeable persistence in bringing the conversation round to personal topics. Baffled at last by the civil terseness, the matter-of-fact languor of Mrs. Marshall's replies, the disappointed lady retired for a time into silence, to recruit her forces and nurse her indignation. Just at this juncture the door opened, and

Georgie appeared, swinging her garden hat in her hand in a suspiciously defiant manner, which Nelly understood at a glance. This particular afternoon had been fixed upon by the sisters for a picnic *à deux* in the woods, after a peculiarly delicious fashion. They were to drink tea, real tea, out of doors—the kettle to be boiled on a twig fire of Georgie's own piling; cakes of indescribable excellence, which Betsey had been baking all the morning, to form the staple of the repast. Now, the worst of Easterton visitors was, that once they were there, there was no getting rid of them till the allotted hour and a half, supposed to be necessary for the refreshment of the unfortunate fly horse that had brought them, had expired. There they sat, welcome or unwelcome, ugly or pretty, old or young; for the time being they were as much an institution as the drawing-room chairs. Sad experience by this time having made poor Georgie wise, with the well-known sound of the approaching wheels of the Easterton fly, her hopes sank below zero—her picnic was at an end! No doubt, it was terribly trying to the philosophy of nine years; so indescribably trying that no words could adequately explain it to those who have never experienced (or forgotten) such childish sorrows them-



selves ; no doubt, too, if Georgie had been a good little girl, she would have taken it sweetly, and accompanied her sister into the drawing-room with smooth hair and unrumped pinafore, to 'speak when spoken to,' and comport herself generally in an amiable and orthodox manner. But then I much mis-doubt me that Georgie was *not* what is commonly understood by 'a good little girl,' though there are worse foes to contend with in many nurseries than the naughtiness of Nelly's golden-haired darling. The black dog had thoroughly settled himself on her shoulders this afternoon. She addressed privately some very shocking French epithets to Miss Fanshawe and her friends, as she hung about outside on the terrace, kicking her hat, and occasionally peeping in, unperceived, at the window, in forlorn hope of some extraordinary piece of good luck shortening the undesirable duration of the visit. But as time went on, and the visitors sat on, her last hope faded, and in a fit of reckless disgust she went into the house and opened the drawing-room door.

'Is that you, Georgie?' said Nelly, trembling inwardly as she caught sight of the peculiar swing of the hat and the general air of the small figure. 'Come in, dear, and shut the door.'

And 'O yes, dear, do come in,' chorused the visitors sweetly, fondly imagining the little girl was 'shy,' like Easterton damsels of her age, and needed encouraging.

Thus adjured, Miss Urquhart condescended to enter, and with the utmost *sang-froid* and solemnity made the round of the assembled circle. Miss Fanshawe, whose spirits revived marvellously at the sight of this unsuspecting and unexpected victim, with the shaggy glistening locks and great innocent blue eyes, found a little chair in convenient proximity to her own, on which she invited the small lady to seat herself. Georgie complied with suspicious readiness, and then, perfectly mistress of the occasion, stared up into the visitor's face, waiting for what would come next.

'Well, my dear Miss Georgie—that is your name, is it not?—so you have been playing in the garden this fine afternoon?' began Miss Fanshawe, in her regular talking-down-to-a-child tone, which did not help to conciliate her companion.

'No, Mademoiselle,' replied the child gravely, 'I beg your pardon; my name is never Miss Georgie; it is Miss Urquhart to strangers, and Georgie to my friends. And I have not been playing in the

garden. There are not many games one only can play at, and I have been alone all this afternoon waiting for my sister.'

'Ah, indeed,' said the lady, slightly taken aback, but all the more determined to make her way, 'then where is your sister, my dear Miss—I did not quite catch your name?'

'It does not matter, Mademoiselle,' replied Georgie indifferently; 'you may call *me* Mademoiselle if you like. At Rochette everybody who is not married is called Mademoiselle, whether they are young or old. My sister used to be Mademoiselle, but now she is Mrs. Marshall,' and she nodded her head slightly in Eleanor's direction.

'I know *that*,' said Miss Fanshawe, relieving herself of her rising wrath by the snappish accent on the last word; 'I was not speaking of Mrs. Marshall, but of the sister you said played with you.'

'That is Mrs. Marshall,' observed Georgie.

'Really!' exclaimed her catechiser, slightly mollified at having one valuable piece of information to 'make a note of,' namely, that Mrs. Marshall spent all her time romping in the garden with a sister who was more than half an idiot; 'really, how very kind of your dear sister! Then have you never had any other

companion to play with—not even at the place where you were before you came here ; what was it called ?

‘London,’ replied Georgie ; ‘I have been at a great many places, but London was the last before we came here.’

‘Nonsense, child!’ exclaimed Miss Fanshawe angrily ; ‘of course you would come by London from abroad. But I mean the place you lived at, where you said young ladies were called Mademoiselle.’

‘That was Rochette,’ answered the child.

‘Ah, yes, of course. How stupid of me to have forgotten the name!’ pursued the lady in an oily tone, thinking all was now to be plain sailing. ‘Then had you no companions at Rochette ? or did you live all alone there too with your dear sister ?’

‘I have never lived alone with my sister,’ was the reply. ‘This is Mr. Marshall’s house, and we live with him because my sister is married to him. And at Rochette we had many friends, and we did not live alone.’

‘Indeed,’ put in Miss Fanshawe gingerly, ‘how very pleasant ! “Many friends” you had ; pray tell me their names.’

‘There was Adèle, and Pauline, and Alphonse,’ began Georgie, ‘and Rosette, and Babette, and

Marthe. Rosette, and Babette, and Marthe were the servants, and—'

'What do I care about the servants, you stupid child!' exclaimed Miss Fanshawe, in her exasperation quite forgetting her policy. But recovering herself quickly, she added in a would-be-playful tone, with an affected laugh, and tapping Georgie mincingly on the shoulder, 'You dear little piece of matter-of-fact, so simple, so charmingly natural! Don't you see, my love, I was not asking you about the servants, but about your *friends*. You know, dear, you told me you had so many charming friends at Rochette. Dear me, you must find poor Easterton, that is to say Chesney, quite dull and lonely in comparison!'

Georgie heard her out in silence, with the exception of a muttered '*vieille chatte*' between her teeth, which Miss Fanshawe did not catch. But the Easterton lady, deceived by the child's apparent simplicity, had gone too far. Georgie's pent-up wrath, increased a thousandfold by the sight of the tired look on Nelly's face, and Miss Fanshawe's impertinent cross-questioning, burst forth at last.

'I never said our friends at Rochette were charming,' she broke out, her blue eyes flashing, her whole face crimsoning with excitement, though she took


care not to speak loud enough for her sister to hear— (poor Nelly, she guessed enough, but interference just then would have done no good, so she went on talking quietly to her other guests)—‘but at least they were not rude. I liked Rochette very much, and I like Chesney very much, except when strange old ladies come and spoil our afternoons, and do nothing but ask me questions, and then scold me when I answer them.’ Having delivered herself of which outburst, the child, ‘a perfect barbarian, my dear, whose manners can only be excused by her *most evidently* being half imbecile,’ rose from her seat, and deliberately crossing the room to where her sister sat, stood, during the rest of the visit, behind Mrs. Marshall’s chair, grasping the back of it firmly with her two little hands, as an unconscious relief to her excited feelings, which otherwise would probably have found vent in an ignominious burst of tears.

She had not very long to restrain herself, however; for Miss Fanshawe, to the surprise of her friends, soon afterwards discovered that the day was very hot, and that a little fresh air would be agreeable, and proposed that they should set out walking on their return home, leaving word for the fly to follow them; which movement shortened the visit by

at least a quarter of an hour. The defeated lady was rather subdued when she first found herself alone with her Easterton friends, fearing they might have overheard her conversation with Georgie. Finding, however, that such was not the case, she speedily plucked-up courage, and regaled her companions all the way home with the startling details she had collected. Her opinion of poor Georgie we have already heard, considering which, and the fact that she and her sister were 'evidently little better than foundlings brought up in some sort of foreign orphanage, where the children had no surnames,' Miss Fanshawe decided that Mr. Marshall was really very much to be pitied. He had been 'taken in, not a doubt of it, poor man, by these people, adventurers of *some* kind.' Not that she, Miss Fanshawe, would dislike the poor things for being foundlings. O dear no! they were to be pitied, not blamed for such a misfortune; but, under the circumstances, she must allow, Mrs. Marshall's haughty manners, the 'airs' she gave herself, were, to say the least, unbecoming; and 'for my part,' the lady wound up, with an affected little laugh, 'I must confess I am one of those people that cannot force their acquaintance where it is plainly shown it is not wanted. I should have been glad to show a

little kindness and attention to the poor thing, but— Well, perhaps I am *too* easily chilled,' &c.

As soon as the visitors had taken their departure, Georgie of course burst into passionate tears, and made full confession to Eleanor of the rude speeches of which she had been guilty; and Nelly, with the strength of mind of a Stoic, was cruel enough to scold her severely, 'all for her good,' though far more inclined in her heart to cry with her. Poor children! even had it not been too late for their picnic, they had no spirit left to enjoy it; and Nelly fidgeted dreadfully till she had related the whole story to Mr. Marshall on his return home late that evening, and received his absolution. He was very kind about it, 'very kind indeed,' she told Georgie; laughed a good deal at Miss Fanshawe's discomfiture (which she did *not* tell her); and mentally congratulated himself on his foresight and good judgment in not having taken his young wife to live among the good people of Easterton, with whom, he felt instinctively, she 'would not have got on.' But he did not say so to Eleanor; and seeing she was really distressed about it, he treated it very lightly, merely telling her she must draw the reins rather tighter in her driving of little Miss Georgie. And he was sincere enough in his



indifference : he knew Miss Fanshawe and her gossiping propensities of old, and knew too that everyone else knew her. She had had a very good lesson, he said to himself, and any way he hoped it would teach her to leave *his* affairs alone for the future ; and if she was offended, he really did not care—he was not afraid of her tongue ; not, indeed, that any one paid any attention to it.

This was rather a mistake, however. Certainly every one in the neighbourhood *did* know Miss Fanshawe, and her long stories and observations were, as a rule, received with considerable reservation ; but still she had her own pet circle of cronies, and they in turn had theirs, many of whom were of course far from ill-natured or unkindly-disposed people, and whose opinions naturally on this account carried the greater weight. There was also an excusable amount of curiosity on the subject of Mr. Marshall's strange marriage, and he had exercised no sort of diplomacy in the direction of endeavouring to make it popular among his friends at Easterton, and thus insuring beforehand some amount of goodwill towards his young wife. Mrs. Ellison too had done her small share of mischief ; for though the airs she *did* give herself rendered her deservedly unpopular in her old

home, she was yet there regarded with considerable awe and respect; and the slightly mysterious and regretful tone she had assumed, to hide her real ignorance of the details of her brother's engagement, and 'how it had all come about,' had not been without its effect. Joined to all this, Eleanor's cold manner and marked shrinking from personal allusion, were pretty certain to be thoroughly misinterpreted and harshly judged. A little, a very little judicious effort would have removed the prejudice, in itself a matter of no real importance; but Nelly was in utter ignorance of its existence, and too unaccustomed to English society to discover that she was coldly received. She only thought it was quite true her country-people were very stiff; and she felt very glad that their living at Chesney rendered them happily independent of unattractive neighbours. It would have hurt her a little perhaps, had she known how she was misjudged; but I question if it would have troubled her for any length of time. But still it was a pity, a great pity, that things turned out as they did in this respect. And it was a great pity too that Mr. Marshall had no worldly-wise friend at hand to remind him of what, in his simplicity, his matter-of-fact unconventionality, he forgot, or did not realise as applicable to his own

case, that it is a risk, a dangerous experiment, for an elderly and not particularly attractive man, be he the kindest, the most generous-minded of his class, to take for his wife an inexperienced girl of eighteen like graceful, gray-eyed Eleanor, though the purest, the sweetest, the truest of her sex. In this, as in many other cases, the better the people, the greater the danger; the finer the porcelain, the more peril of breakage; and alas, alas! the whiter the marble the more easily stained—more terrible at least the thought of the slightest suspicion of spot on the perfection of its purity.

Of all women, Eleanor Marshall should have been sheltered by the friendship of a few wise kindly souls of her own sex; to instruct her ignorance without marring her innocence, to teach her some of the sad lessons that must be learnt sooner or later in this life—that dangers sometimes lurk where least suspected; that, for more reasons than those of mere expediency, the very ‘appearance of evil’ even is well avoided; that, after all, the best, the very best of us are often miserable self-deceivers. Hard unpalatable truths these, however gently told; terribly scorching lessons, when taught by sore personal experience; or, worse still, sneered into pure bewil-

dered ears by cruel taunting tongues. And among the first visitors at Chesney Feathers, there were some good kindly women, whose friendship might have been of value to Eleanor; but without in the least intending it, she chilled them away, and Miss Fanshawe's spite indirectly sent them farther still. But Nelly only thought, with Georgie, that visitors were 'a great tease, and they were much happier without them;' and Mr. Marshall thought the story of Miss Fanshawe's defeat a good joke, and agreed with his wife, that they did not want acquaintances.

One or two feeble attempts at sociability, in the shape of invitations to dinner or evening parties, were civilly declined. Eleanor paid the whole of her calls in Easterton in the course of one afternoon, staying about ten minutes in each drawing-room, and unaccompanied by Georgie, whose lovely face would surely have found its way to some among the maternal hearts of the Easterton matrons. But there seemed a run of bad luck throughout; though so serenely unconscious of it was Mrs. Marshall, that on her way home she congratulated herself on having 'got it all over so nicely.'

One little social disappointment did, however, come home to Mr. Marshall. He had somehow

counted securely on the friendship of Mrs. Nugent and her daughters for his young wife; and as the days and weeks went by, and no carriage from the Priory drew up at The Feathers gate, he took it rather to heart. Fortunately he had never spoken of the Nugents to Eleanor; so the disappointment fell on himself alone, and he consoled himself by putting it all down to some ill-natured crabbedness on the part of 'th' ould Squoire,' forgetting that the reticence he had himself so unnecessarily observed on the subject of his engagement to his old friends was not the way to secure their goodwill for his unknown bride. Still he was right in blaming the Squire. Mrs. Nugent was not the sort of person to hang back from calling on Mrs. Marshall because she had not received wedding cards, or exact information on the subject of her antecedents and belongings; and very soon after hearing of the little family's arrival in the neighbourhood, she announced her intention of driving over to call at The Feathers; but to her amazement Mr. Nugent told her he would 'allow her to do no such thing.'

'Not call on Mr. Marshall's wife—our old friend Mr. Marshall!' she exclaimed in astonishment.

'Certainly not,' he replied.

‘But why, my dear?’ she persisted. ‘It cannot be because they are living at Chesney. That is a mere accident. I agree with you in not being very fond of Sir Robert, as you know, and I would never have proposed calling on any one there, simply because they were friends or tenants of his; but that is not the case with the Marshalls. Mr. Marshall is a very old friend of *ours*, though he now happens to be Sir Robert’s tenant.’

‘I should have thought more of him if he had *not* become a tenant of Sir Robert’s,’ growled the Squire. ‘He’s a screw, and his brother’s a fool. But they’re nothing to me, neither the one nor the other; and it is *not* because Marshall’s gone to live at Chesney that I won’t have you call on his wife.’

With the last few mysterious words the Squire’s surliness diminished, and Mrs. Nugent—accustomed, poor woman, by the incessant observation of a quarter of a century, to detect the slightest variation in the human barometer by which she was obliged to regulate her conduct—was not slow to perceive that her husband wished to be cross-questioned. A little judicious inquiry brought out the budget of gossip the Squire was, in reality, burning to retail; for, fortunately perhaps, on the whole, he was nearly as

great a tattle as a fidget, and loved a good dish of scandal almost as well as a lawsuit. There was really not much to hear, however, in the present instance. He had been at Easterton the day before, and had met somebody who had asked him what *he* thought of this queer marriage of old Marshall's, and had gone on to tell him the various particulars that had oozed out. A French girl, in the first place (and the Squire hated French people with a holy hatred), or, at least, a girl brought up abroad, which was nearly as bad; a foundling, or, any way, a young woman with no relations that had been heard of, in the second place; and, thirdly and lastly, a young person who did not know her proper place, having on various occasions comported herself with most unbecoming haughtiness to several Easterton ladies who had honoured her with their attention. This was about the sum-total of the Squire's information, but, such as it was, it had decided poor Nelly's fate so far as any friendly intercourse with the Priory family was concerned.

Mrs. Nugent felt sorry, but knew that it was useless to oppose her husband's fiat. 'Some time or other,' she thought to herself, 'we may happen to meet them, and the Squire may change his mind.'

I cannot help pitying that poor girl, somehow, though I know nothing about her, and I daresay Mr. Marshall will make a good husband. But it seems an unnatural marriage. And how strange of him not to have told me about it when he was here !'

The pity was lost on its object at present, anyhow. At the moment Mrs. Nugent was standing at the window of her morning-room, thinking somewhat sadly of the youthful stranger, whose life must be so isolated and monotonous, Eleanor was most happily employed in directing her friend the carpenter to fix a little seat securely among the branches of the old oak at the south of The Feathers garden—a seat which was to be big enough to hold herself and Georgie, and Georgie's white kitten, and to which they intended to retire by means of the garden ladder, on hot days, when shade was desirable, and fairy tales and such-like light literature suitable and refreshing food for the mind.

'O, how beautiful it will be—how charming!' screamed Miss Georgie, dancing about in ecstasy at the foot of the tree. 'And O, Nelly, if people come to call, they'll never be able to find us up there.'

CHAPTER X.

‘SPEAK OF ANGELS, AND THEIR WINGS WILL BRUSH YOU.’

‘All thing, which that shineth as the gold,
Ne is no gold, as I have herd it told.’

The Chanones’ Yemannes Tale.

‘La beauté pour le sexe est un rare trésor ;
De l’admirer jamais on ne se lasse.
Mais ce qu’on nomme bonne grâce
Est sans prix, et vaut mieux encor.

* * * * *

Belles, ce don vaut mieux que d’être bien coiffées.
Pour engager un cœur, pour en venir a bout,
La bonne grâce est le vrai don des fées :
Sans elle on ne peut rien, avec elle on peut tout.’

CENDRILLON DE PERRAULT, Moralité.

NOTWITHSTANDING Mrs. Marshall’s disinclination for society—such society, at least, as had come within her observation since her arrival at Chesney—there was one person with whom some amount of friendly intimacy was almost unavoidable. This was the

rector's wife, little Mrs. Bland. She called on the young mistress of The Feathers on the first possible opportunity—which, however, did not occur till some weeks after the new-comers' installation, for at the time of their arrival the whole of the Bland family was away at the seaside, and the Sunday duties performed by a neighbouring curate. Had Eleanor been a very much more unsociable person than she was, it would have been difficult for her to resist her new acquaintance's evident determination to be on the best of terms; and as Mrs. Bland was, on the whole, an amiable, and, in her small way, an agreeable enough little woman, Nelly gave in to some extent, with a pretty good grace.

There were several reasons for Mrs. Bland's readiness to receive with open arms the new inhabitants of the metamorphosed hostel. Some amount of unselfish kindness had to do with it perhaps, and also the agreeable sense of importance, that on her and her husband, in the absence of 'the family,' devolved the duty of welcoming, with fitting cordiality, the new settlers in the little colony.

'Sir Robert, indeed, had said as much,' she confided to Eleanor the second or third time they met; 'he did indeed, I assure you, dear Mrs. Marshall.

He made quite a point of it with Charles ; said that he looked to *us* in his absence to make you feel quite at home here. Not but what we should of course have been most delighted to do all in our power to welcome you without any such recommendation, but still I thought it might gratify you to hear it. It shows you, too, the charming terms we are on with the Court. Any little wish of Sir Robert's or Lady Chesney's they express to us at once, just in this easy way, you see. It is *so* pleasant to be on such charming terms.'

'Very pleasant indeed,' replied Eleanor, though she was far from understanding what her companion was talking about. And she would have been more puzzled still, had she heard the exact words in which Sir Robert had so gratifyingly 'recommended' them to the attentions of the Rectory.

'You'll look up those Marshalls who are coming to The Feathers, by the bye, Bland?' he had said with his usual gruffness, the last time he met the clergyman before leaving home. 'I know nothing on earth about them ; but it wouldn't suit me for the place to change hands again while I am away, and he has only got it on a year's trial, in the first place, to see if his wife likes it, and he promises to be a good tenant. You'll

send your wife to call on her, I hope?' To which Mr. Bland, being an easy-going, good-natured man, pretty well inured to Sir Robert's surliness, and not without a spice of superstitious veneration of *his* 'great man,' replied that he would certainly do so. And his wife, who had a happy knack of seeing everything *couleur de rose* that emanated from the charmed precincts of the Court, felt greatly flattered by Sir Robert's expressed wish that she should, figuratively speaking, 'do the honours' to the strangers, and ingeniously translated her husband's message in the gratifying manner aforesaid.

Probably, however, Mrs. Bland's strongest motive for selecting Mrs. Marshall, even before she had seen her, to the post of bosom-friend, was the very simple and natural one of her finding Chesney exceedingly dull. She had lived there ever since her marriage, seven or eight years ago, and every year it seemed to her to grow duller, notwithstanding the succession of olive-branches which made their appearance with the unfailing regularity to be expected under the circumstances of their father being a poor clergyman, their mother the sixth daughter of a still poorer. Not that she neglected the olive-branches, by any means; they were very well looked after, and

throve apace, appetites included. But when, for the time being, their wants were all supplied, her own last summer's alpaca metamorphosed into very tidy little garments for the twin-girls aged five, Master Charlie's first knickerbockers proudly donned, and baby's worst tooth triumphantly cut—at such times it was dull work. She missed the five sisters whose sympathy she had been sure of on all occasions, however trifling; she missed the noisy brothers whose education it had been such hard work to overtake; she missed the poverty-stricken home where at least all the pinching and toiling, and toadying even (they had had to toady, poor people—how else would Lady Beauchamp have offered to let Mary join her girls in their French lessons?—where would Frank's nomination have been?), had been done in concert. And now they were all scattered; the five sisters—some married, some toiling as governesses—all too far away for frequent meeting to be possible; and so, though Mrs. Bland owned, and with reason, that she was exceedingly well off in her husband, her home, an income which was riches compared to what *she* had been brought up on, and had a fair chance of some day becoming greater, she still had frequent fits of voting Chesney very dull, and rapturously welcomed

the idea of a neighbour of her own sex and 'position,' not more than ten years her junior.

Eleanor was very much amused by Mrs. Bland's gushing reception of her, and still more by her sad tale of seclusion and isolation, but she rather offended the little lady by one perfectly innocent suggestion.

'Have you never made friends with any of the Easterton ladies?' she asked. 'It might have been less lonely for you, had you seen some of them now and then.'

'Easterton, my dear Mrs. Marshall!' exclaimed Mrs. Bland with a toss of her head. 'Easterton! O dear no. In the first place, it is really a long way off, and then—O no, one *couldn't* be on intimate terms with Easterton people. They are so—so—provincial, you know' (Mrs. Bland had only once been in London for a week), 'and all that. You, who have been so much abroad, dear Mrs. Marshall, O, you must see the difference!'

'I don't know,' said Eleanor simply; 'English people are certainly very different from French or Swiss. It takes longer to know them. But I dare say there are some very nice people at Easterton; Mr. Marshall has lived there nearly all his life, you know, Mrs. Bland. I only do not feel inclined to see

much of his Easterton friends, because just now I am not inclined for any society. Indeed, I don't think I ever shall be. I wish to live very quietly, and to have plenty of time to attend to Georgie.'

'Ah yes, to be sure. How *very* good you are to your little sister, dear Mrs. Marshall, and how sweetly pretty she is!' exclaimed Mrs. Bland rapturously. 'But really,' she went on, 'I do not think you lose anything by not seeing much of Easterton.'

'Perhaps not,' said Eleanor indifferently, for the subject was of little interest to her, though one on which, once started, silly Mrs. Bland was apt to hold forth to the extent of making one suspect—what was in fact the truth—that there was a considerable mixture of fox-and-sour-grapes feeling in her detestation of Easterton. And certainly she had no particular reason for liking it or its inhabitants; for they had taken very little notice of her existence, the unpopularity of the Chesney family affecting their innocent dependents far more injuriously than themselves.

'You must find it much pleasanter when your friends at Chesney Court are at home,' then said Eleanor rashly, little suspecting she had again started her visitor on another favourite hobby. 'I forget, I

am sure, if they are all old people. There is a son, is there not, and a daughter? I think I have heard Mr. Marshall mention a Mr. and Miss Chesney.'

'O yes, but Mr. and Miss Chesney are not Sir Robert's son and daughter. I am quite surprised you have not heard all about the family already,' said Mrs. Bland, settling herself more comfortably on her seat as she prepared for the pleasure of communicating all interesting particulars on the subject.

'Mr. Marshall knows very little of them,' answered Eleanor, with no very great display of anxiety to learn more, 'and I am afraid I am rather stupid about my neighbours. I have already got quite confused with the names and relations of some of Mr. Marshall's Easterton friends.'

'O, but it is *quite* different about the family at the Court,' remonstrated her visitor in a slightly shocked tone. 'You should know all about them, dear Mrs. Marshall. You are sure to know them when they come home. Lady Chesney is seldom able to call anywhere herself; but I have no doubt Miss Chesney will do so for her.'

'But that will not be for a long time,' said Eleanor carelessly. 'Two years they are to be away, are they not?'

‘Two years from the time they left, and that is already six months ago,’ corrected Mrs. Bland. ‘O, the time will soon pass; as I said to Miss Chesney when she drove down in her pony-carriage to bid me good-bye.’

‘Was she sorry to leave her home, then?’ asked Nelly with more interest. ‘I like her for that. But who is Miss Chesney then, Mrs. Bland, if she is not Sir Robert’s daughter?’

‘His sister,’ replied her informant oracularly; ‘his only sister, and devotedly attached to him. Mr. Chesney is a great many years younger than Sir Robert and Miss Chesney—Horatia, her name is—he, Mr. Chesney, I mean, is only their step-brother, but unfortunately he is the heir.’

‘Why unfortunately?’ inquired Mrs. Marshall.

‘O, because of course it is a great disappointment to Sir Robert to have no children of his own; and then besides, Mr. Chesney is so—I don’t know what to call it—so tiresome; he never will do anything they want. It is enough to irritate anybody. He is so odd. I couldn’t possibly describe him. He hates ladies, and sometimes, when I have sat next him at dinner, he has never said one word all the time; and if Sir Robert spoke to him even, he would hardly

reply. They do say he is standing out now about this marriage to Miss Berners, which has been as good as arranged for ever so long, and would be a splendid thing for him. She is so rich, and her friends would like it too, for the sake of the connection, for the Chesneys are much better than the Berners.'

'But perhaps Mr. Chesney and Miss Berners do not like the idea of it themselves,' suggested Eleanor simply.

'*She* does,' said Mrs. Bland. 'Miss Chesney told me so herself. "Amethyst Berners"—is it not a sweet name?—"Amethyst Berners likes my brother all the better because he does not run after her as every one else does already," was what she said.'

'Then perhaps *he* does not like *her*,' replied Eleanor, beginning to laugh.

'Then he is very silly indeed,' maintained the elder lady, whose mind was evidently incapable of taking any but the Miss-Chesney view of the subject under discussion. 'She is the richest heiress in the county, and *so* beautiful. O, of course it is sure to be eventually, but it is very silly of the young man to be so sleepy about it.'

'And Lady Chesney?' said Eleanor with some faint curiosity, though she was beginning to get very

tired of her visitor and the Chesneys in general—‘did you not say she was an invalid?’

‘Yes, an incurable invalid,’ replied Mrs. Bland. ‘She can hardly ever walk or stand. It is very sad, I suppose; but she has everything she wants. I can’t see, for my part, that she is so very much to be pitied. Indeed, I think it sometimes falls hardest on dear Miss Chesney. But then she is such a wonderful woman. Quite Sir Robert’s right hand. She has lived with them always, and done everything. Lady Chesney should think herself very fortunate in having such a sister-in-law.’

But Eleanor hardly seemed inclined to agree with her; for she murmured, half inaudibly,

‘Poor thing!—And has Lady Chesney never had any children?’ she asked aloud.

‘Yes; one—a little boy, too, which made it worse. I do feel for her when I think of that,’ answered Mrs. Bland, with a real womanliness in her tone, which made Nelly think she might come to like her more when she knew her better. ‘He only lived a week; and she has never been well since. It is nearly twenty years ago now. Mr. Chesney was quite a little boy then. And the queer thing is, Lady Chesney, though she had always been fond of him,

became perfectly devoted to him when her own child died, and she gradually gave up hopes of having another. When he was a very little fellow, she would hardly bear him out of her sight. It was the old housekeeper told me this—not Miss Chesney. Wasn't it queer?

'It was very beautiful, I think,' said Mrs. Marshall softly; and her companion stared at the expression.

'Well, certainly,' she replied, with a remarkably inappropriate little giggle, to which she was in the habit of resorting when at a loss for a suitable way of expressing herself, 'it's very nice, of course, to see them so attached; but still, I think, it's very odd; and you can fancy it's rather irritating to Sir Robert and dear Miss Chesney. Dear Miss Chesney was not much attached to her stepmother, Mr. Chesney's mother. And, indeed, I do not fancy she had much reason to be; for I *have* heard,' pursued Mrs. Bland, nodding her head confidentially, 'that she was quite beneath her husband in rank, and no fortune either. Of course, Sir Robert is very rich; but, considering all, it is only natural for them to expect Mr. Chesney to marry well. Ah, it's very trying to dear Miss Chesney altogether, so devoted to

her family as she is. Of course, dear Mrs. Marshall, I would not say all this to any one but *you*; but with you I feel I can speak in perfect confidence.'

Considering this was only the second time they had ever met, Eleanor felt very much inclined to ask her communicative companion what possible grounds she could have for this pleasing trust in her discretion and powers of reticence. But on second thoughts she dismissed the temptation, and, feeling rather ashamed of herself for allowing Mrs. Bland's gossip to proceed so far unchecked, began to beat her brains for some new ideas wherewith to change the subject of conversation, when a startling interruption occurred.

For the last hour, during which Mrs. Bland's visit had lasted, Georgie had been employed in entertaining Master Charlie Bland, who had accompanied his mamma, after her own fashion, in the garden. Charlie, being a plucky little fellow, very fairly mischievous for his tender years, the occupation was considerably to Georgie's taste. But, O, how the poor mamma would have shivered, had she seen the awful dangers and hair-breadth escapes to which her darling was exposed during the hour he passed in perfect happiness under the charge of the blue-eyed

damsel with the face of angelic innocence, whose manners were so unexceptionable, and who so sweetly volunteered to 'play in the garden with the little boy if Madame liked' !

To do her justice, Georgie was perfectly able to take good care of him, and really did so ; but when it is related that their amusement commenced by wading across the brook, and ended by climbing up the ladder into the favourite oak-tree perch, many timorous mothers will allow that Mrs. Bland would have been perfectly justified in the alarm she doubtless would have felt, had she known of these proceedings. From the oak-tree perch the children had at last descended in safety, and were turning towards the house, when Charlie missed his cap, and Georgie climbed up again to see if it had been left in the tree. She found it, and was just about coming down again, when a noise in the road caught her attention. She threw the cap down to the child, and climbed up a branch or two higher, from whence she had a full view of the high road. The noise was quickly explained. A carriage, driverless, drawn by two madly terrified horses, came tearing along the road, at so furious a rate that it swung from side to side as it came, each frightful lurch threatening to end in some



hideous catastrophe; for there were two, if not three, ladies huddled together inside—Georgie could not see clearly how many; she only caught sight of a mass of bright-coloured garments; and for a moment she felt sick, and covered her eyes. Then her presence of mind returned to her, and she came down from the tree as nimbly as a monkey.

‘John, John!’ she screamed to the gardener, a stout active young man at work close by—‘John, John! there’s a carriage running away, and ladies in it! Run out to the road, John—quick, quick!’

And ‘quick, quick’ John, nothing loath, dashed out; and Georgie rushed into the drawing-room to startle Nelly and poor Mrs. Bland out of their wits with her news.

‘O dear, O dear!’ exclaimed the latter lady faintly, ‘how very horrible! O, dear Miss Georgie, do be so good as fetch Charlie. I must go home at once. I am so afraid always of seeing anything horrible; it quite upsets me. Dear Mrs. Marshall, do pray excuse me!’

But by this time Mrs. Marshall had disappeared, having run off to see the ending of the catastrophe, and—not being a young woman much troubled with nerves—to be of any use she could. Georgie was just

following her, but turned round at the door to advise Mrs. Bland, somewhat contemptuously, to remain where she was for the present; 'for you can't go home without seeing something horrible, if there is anything; for I am almost sure I heard the carriage smash over as I ran in.'

Mrs. Bland shrieked, and stopped her ears; but Georgie heartlessly left her, and ran out through the hall by the front door, which her sister had left wide open. Her hearing had not deceived her: the crisis whatever it was, had occurred just opposite their gate and already a little crowd was collected, hiding from the child's sight the probably sickening results of the accident, which, notwithstanding her contempt for Mrs. Bland's 'nerves,' poor Georgie was more than half inclined to run away from on her own account. But she caught sight of Nelly's dress in the group of figures, and, taking courage, flew to her and seized her hand. Nelly turned round as she felt herself touched.

'Is anybody hurt? Tell me quick, Nelly!' exclaimed the child, and her little face was all white and quivering.

But Eleanor was quite calm.

'My darling, no, I am thankful to say; but you

must not look so startled. I am just waiting to ask these ladies to come in and rest. They must have had a terrible fright. Run back, dear, and ask Betsey to get out the sherry and brandy, and have them ready in the drawing-room.'

Now that she was satisfied there was nothing very horrible to be faced, Georgie would have enjoyed the fun of staying to see the horses extricated from the traces, and the ladies from the carriage; but, in obedience to Nelly, she ran off without waiting to hear more. It had certainly been a marvelously narrow escape. What had stopped the horses in their mad flight, no one was exactly able to say; for John the gardener had only arrived on the scene in time to assist the two or three other men, who, of course, turned up simultaneously, in preventing the still terrified horses from doing farther damage in their struggles to free themselves from the entangled harness. The extrication of the two ladies was not a very easy matter; for the carriage was jammed so closely into the hedge, that access to the one side was impossible, and on the other it was so tilted up, that it was with the greatest difficulty the men at last succeeded in opening the door.

'I am so glad you are not hurt,' said Eleanor,

the only woman in the group, as she pressed forward eagerly; 'but I fear you must be sadly shaken and frightened. Will you—pray, do—cross the road with me to my house—The Feathers—opposite, and rest there while they see what damage is done to the carriage.'

The elder of the two ladies seemed too bewildered and terrified to reply, or indeed to understand what was said to her. She caught hold of her young companion in a half-frantic way, and commenced kissing and hugging her, while she ejaculated, 'My dearest, my sweetest! O, my dear, do tell me again you are not hurt! Are you quite sure you are not hurt? O, my dearest pet, how shaken you must be! How can we ever punish that wretched man for letting the horses run away, and all but killing you, my beautiful darling!' And then she recommenced her 'dearests' and 'sweetests,' intermingled with abuse of 'the wretched fellow' who, she chose to say, had been the cause of the accident.

''Twasn't nohow th' fault o' coachman,' said a sturdy young fellow, who had been one of the most active and fearless in disentangling the horses, his natural *esprit de corps* rising in excusable indignation. 'Him did his best, poor chap, and have

hurt his leg bad up th' lane, where wur throwed off.'

'How dare you contradict this lady!' said the young girl, shaking herself free impatiently of her mother's hold, and muttering disrespectfully, 'How can you be so silly, mamma!'—'How dare you be so insolent!' she went on, facing round sharp on the unfortunate countryman who had ventured a word in defence of the absent, and now stood wiping his honest brow, hot and moist with his efforts in their behalf. It is not often a flush of indignation can be detected through the sun-burn of a ploughman's face; but as Eleanor glanced at the young fellow beside her, she fancied a deeper red overspread his cheeks and brow.

'Insolent!' he muttered, as he turned doggedly aside—'insolent! By George, better break stones on th' road, nor sarve such as thee!'

The young girl might have caught the sense of his words; for she gave a slight contemptuous laugh, which Eleanor disliked even more than the sound of her haughty words. Still, of course, Mrs. Marshall repeated her hospitable invitation.

'Thank you,' said the young lady coolly; 'I am not at all shaken. It's very disagreeable, all this fuss, and I do so dislike a crowd. Well, perhaps we

may as well go and wait somewhere, while they see about some way of our getting home.—Really, mamma, I do wish you would not excite yourself so ;’ for the elder lady was still continuing her ejaculations and lamentations,—‘it’s all quite right. Nobody’s hurt but Stevens ; and as it must have been his own fault, I don’t feel inclined to waste much pity on him.’

Without more being said, Mrs. Marshall, offering her arm to the mother, who seemed really terribly upset, led the way across the road to her own door, still standing open.

‘This is The Feathers, didn’t you say ?’ inquired the young lady. ‘It’s an inn, isn’t it ? I suppose we can get post-horses here ?’

‘No,’ replied Eleanor quietly, ‘The Feathers is no longer an inn. I think I mentioned that it is our house. I fear you cannot get post-horses anywhere at Chesney.’

‘How tiresome !’ exclaimed the girl. ‘What in the world shall we do, mamma ? It will be too bad if we have to give up going to Farnworth to-night all through that stupid Stevens.’


‘Yes, indeed, my love,’ sympathised her mother ; and then, with rather more civility than was shown by her daughter, she proceeded to explain to Eleanor

that they had only returned from town the day before, and the whole of their household had not yet arrived in the country, which was the reason of their having ventured out under the sole convoy of poor Stevens.

‘Mr. Berners said before we left town we had better not drive out till the head coachman came down; but dear Amethyst was so anxious to pay some calls to-day, that I could not bear to disappoint her.’

She spoke with an amusing confidingness, as if her companion, whoever she was, could not but be quite *au fait* of the concerns of such important members of society as herself and her belongings; whereas, but for the coincidence of Mrs. Bland’s having mentioned them that very afternoon, Mrs. Marshall would have been in a state of disgraceful ignorance of the existence of any Berners under the sun. By this time they had reached the house, and Eleanor led the way into her pretty drawing-room, where Mrs. Bland, just beginning to recover from her fluster and agitation, had a violent relapse on recognising the august individuals whose horses had dared to run away with them.

‘O, dear Mrs. Berners!’ she exclaimed in a tone



of agony—‘O dearest Miss Berners, you don’t mean to say it’s *you*! O, it is too frightful!’

Dear Mrs. Berners had collapsed into a comfortable arm-chair, and seemed unequal to the exertion of saying more. Dearest Miss Berners stared about her coolly, and her glance accidentally lighting on Mrs. Bland, she condescended to hold out two fingers, saying carelessly,

‘How do you do, Mrs. ——. I beg your pardon, I think I have seen you at Chesney?’

‘O dear, yes; *many* times, on *many* happy occasions,’ eagerly rejoined Mrs. Bland. ‘I am so grieved, so truly distressed, you should have met with this terrible fright, and O, so thankful you are not hurt in some dreadful way!’ and she covered her eyes, and looked as if she was preparing to faint. Miss Berners smiled contemptuously.

‘Thanks,’ she said pertly; ‘I wasn’t frightened at all. But I should like to know how we are to get home. The person who brought us in here,’ she went on, looking round, but Eleanor had left the room, ‘says they don’t keep post-horses now. I thought it was an inn.’

Mrs. Bland looked rather startled.

‘O dear, no,’ she whispered hurriedly, hearing

Eleanor's step returning along the hall; 'it is not an inn now. That lady is Mrs. Marshall, a very charming person, dear Miss Berners.'

'Really,' said the young lady, with the same indifferent tone, 'I didn't know. But what are we to do if there are no post-horses to be got? Mamma, pray don't go to sleep. What are we to do?'

'Perhaps,' suggested Mrs. Berners meekly, 'Mrs. —, Mrs. Martin, will be so good as send to see if Stevens can't ride home to tell them to send for us.'

Eleanor just then appeared, carrying the wine, of which poor Mrs. Berners was really in need, and followed by Georgie. The child caught sight of Miss Berners the moment she entered the room, and stood as if spell-bound by Amethyst's dazzling brilliancy of appearance; for she was very sensitive to such impressions, and the heiress was undoubtedly marvelously, bewilderingly pretty. Everything about her, too, added to the impression. Her dress was of the richest material, the brightest yet most delicately modulated colours; when she moved, there was a flutter of lace, a subtle suspicion of perfume; a general sensation of fine ladyism in its most ethereal form, exceedingly wonderful and fascinating to little Georgie in her holland pinafore, who had never

dreamt of anything more gorgeous in attire than the plain blue silk which had been Nelly's best evening-dress at Rochette, or her own white muslin with rose-coloured ribbons; and the revelation was very startling. Yet there was nothing overdone in Amethyst's attire. Either she was possessed, like most *exceedingly* pretty women, of exquisite taste in what concerned herself, or she was sensible enough to submit herself unconditionally to her French milliner, or to some very wise female in ladies'-maids; but, after all, it is hardly fair to dwell much on her dress, for truly she was pretty enough to have dispensed with its perfection. She would have looked exquisite in anything; and just now she was looking her very best, for agitation of some kind—annoyance or petulance, perhaps—had heightened the colour on her delicate cheeks, and deepened the brilliance of her dark-blue eyes. Her hair, as lovely as and scarcely darker than Georgie's own, was partly shaken loose; and she was just the woman to be improved by untidy hair, for it gave to her face its one great want—shadow. Her features were all perfect of their kind, with the single exception of her eyebrows, which were too light, and the effect of the dark eyes was therefore curious, and a little startling. Her

admirers of course admired it ; and whatever were her own opinions on the subject, she was wise enough to leave nature alone. There was one peculiarity about this defect, if such it were—it only made itself felt at a distance : close at hand the face of Amethyst Berners was bewitching enough to make one forget there was any higher type of beauty on earth, to excuse a man's giving no sort of thought to the mind and heart and soul of this dazzling little fairy.

‘ And yet that young Mr. Chesney is said to hang back from marrying her,’ came into Eleanor's mind, as she stood for a moment gazing at the beautiful heiress nearly as intently as Georgie herself. Eleanor was not the sort of woman to be chary of admiration of another woman—she was both too simple, and too keenly susceptible of beauty wherever she met it—yet she felt no indignation for her slighted sex, no surprise even, when the thought occurred to her, that one person in the world was not too ready to yield to the charms before her. ‘ Somehow I don't wonder at it,’ was the result of her cogitations ; for though she was not the very least offended by having been taken for the landlady (or the landlady's daughter) of The Feathers, still, no doubt, on this, her first meeting with the beauty of the county, that young

person had not shown herself, on the whole, to advantage.

A messenger was dispatched to look up poor Stevens, who proved, however, to be altogether *hors de combat*; his right leg evidently broken, and a surgeon already sent for by the owners of the cottage into which he had been carried. Mrs. Berners was really sorry for the poor man; and Miss Berners was gracious enough to say she would ask papa not to stop his wages, though at the same time she thought he quite deserved it, for attempting to do what he couldn't. Evidently the young lady had not yet recovered her temper; and all her mother's petting, and soothing, and applause of her wonderful bravery and presence of mind, failed to restore it. There was nothing to be done but to send a ploughboy on a farm-horse the five miles to Parkhurst, with a note to the steward explaining the catastrophe; and it was past six o'clock when a brougham at last appeared at The Feathers, to convey home the distressed ladies who had there taken refuge.

Mrs. Berners thanked her kind young hostess cordially enough for her hospitality; Miss Berners, who had done nothing but yawn for the last half hour, forgot to say anything of the kind, but, extending the two

fingers again to Mrs. Bland, and bowing in the slightest manner to Eleanor, hastened to follow her mother into the carriage. Then, to Eleanor's great relief, the rector's wife, who could not tear herself away while the great ladies were still on the spot, at last took leave; and Nelly, throwing herself on the sofa, declared she was more tired than if she had walked to Easterton and back.

'Nelly,' said Georgie very gravely, 'is not that lady very, *exceedingly* pretty?'

'Yes, dear,' replied her sister sleepily; 'I suppose she is, and so are her clothes.'

'O, beautiful!' exclaimed the child ecstatically. 'I never saw anything so lovely. Adèle said the ladies in Paris dress the finest; but they couldn't dress finer than that. I wish we had stayed in Paris a few days, Nelly; I should like to have seen the grand ladies.'

'Are you so very fond of fine clothes, dear?' inquired Eleanor.

'*Very*,' replied her little sister in perfect good faith. 'Sometimes I think I like them better than anything, except—except the stars, I think, and some flowers, and fairy-stories, and my white kitten.'

'And not poor me?' suggested Nelly mischiev-

ously; for which she was punished by Georgie's climbing up the back of the sofa and descending on the top of her, to hug and kiss her with the greater facility.

'*Of course*, I love you best of everybody and everything, and you do me—don't you—don't you?' she repeated, half strangling Nelly with her vehemence, till in self-defence the elder sister was forced to say 'yes.'

Then Georgie lay still for a minute or two, peering up gravely into Nelly's deep loving gray eyes.

'What are you thinking about, child?' asked her sister at last.

'I'm thinking—' said Georgie, and then she stopped. 'Nelly,' she went on again in a moment, 'you're not nearly so pretty as that young lady; but do you know, I like the look in your eyes much the best?'

'Do you, dear? I'm very glad you do,' answered Nelly simply.

'And, indeed, Nelly,' pursued the child, 'don't think it is because she didn't speak to me; I know even nice ladies don't always speak to little girls, and I'd rather they didn't than ask questions like that Miss Fanchose; but indeed, Nelly, for all that she is

so pretty, I do not believe I like that young lady at all.' And shaking her head gravely, as if these oracular words had sealed Miss Berners' fate, Georgie sat up and looked at her sister, to see what she would say.

'I don't think I do, either,' said Nelly; 'but it's wrong to take up prejudices, Georgie. Let us go into the garden for a breath of fresh air before Mr. Marshall comes home.'

CHAPTER XI.

A SHADOW OF MISGIVING.

'We twa hae run about the braes,
And pu'd the gowans fine ;

* * * *

We twa hae paidl't i' the burn
Frae mornin' sun till dine.'

Auld lang syne.

A FEW days after, when Eleanor and her sister were returning by the high-road from a long ramble in the fields, about two miles from Chesney, they were overtaken by a carriage. Hearing it advancing upon them, they climbed a little way up the bank at the side of the road to escape the clouds of dust kicked up by the horses' feet. As the carriage drew nearer, they recognised its occupants—Mrs. Berners and her daughter and another lady.

'It's those ladies, Nelly,' said Georgie, with a little shake of annoyance.

‘Never mind, you silly child,’ replied her sister. ‘What does it matter? They will probably not recognise us; and if they do, they will only bow as they pass. We shall not have to invite them to spend another afternoon with us, if that’s what you’re afraid of.’

‘O, but I don’t like even seeing them, Nelly,’ persisted the child. ‘They give me nasty feelings. I am angry at the young lady for having such grand clothes and being so pretty, because it’s not a kind sort of prettiness.’

‘Well then, shut your eyes till they’re past,’ suggested Nelly, half laughing, and yet not unsympathising. ‘I’ll take care you don’t fall.’

But Nelly was premature in her assertion that a passing bow would be all accorded to them in the way of recognition. The moment the occupants of the carriage caught sight of them, a slight fuss ensued, caused by Mrs. Berners’ endeavours to make the coachman understand he was to pull up—endeavours which were evidently not seconded by her daughter seated opposite her, who appeared to remonstrate with her on her intention. They were *en grande tenue* this time; no dearth of attendants in front and behind; and among them their mistress’s

wish was communicated to the coachman, who drew up exactly opposite the bank on which the sisters had taken refuge, Georgie standing with her eyes closely shut. The road was very dusty, and Mrs. Marshall did not particularly fancy descending from her position at the bidding of the footman whose 'lady desired to speak to her.' 'If you please,' he was civil enough to add; and Eleanor felt a refusal would have been an absurd assertion of dignity, where probably 'no offence was meant.' And certainly poor Mrs. Berners, silly and self- (or rather daughter-) engrossed as she was, intended nothing but kindness; and it really never occurred to her that she was behaving towards 'that pleasing young person, the wife of the Easterton lawyer,' in any but an unexceptionable manner. Poor Nelly had indeed a good deal to learn about the manners and customs of certain of her country-people, and their very unique ideas on the subject of breeding, good and bad.

Why should not Miss Berners, a younger woman than herself, at all events an unmarried one (and Nelly had all the continental notions of the natural dignity conferred by matronhood—the old-world northern discarding of the snood and donning of the mutch)—why should not Miss Berners have jumped

out of the carriage and run towards her with her mother's message, whatever it was? Mr. Marshall's young wife asked herself, as, more slowly and sedately than was her wont, she approached her guests of a few days' before. But she was not the sort of woman to show such feelings when Mrs. Berners greeted her with real cordiality, while holding towards her a large bouquet of the most exquisite exotics.

'I am so glad to have met you, Mrs.—Mrs. Martin,' she began. 'We were just going to call at your house to thank you again so much for your kindness the other day. We got home quite safe; and—and Amethyst and I' (she glanced appealingly at her daughter, who thereupon condescended to turn her face round the least bit in the world more towards Mrs. Marshall), 'we thought perhaps you'd like some flowers;' and again she extended the lovely, fragrant, dazzling handful of beauty to Eleanor.

'Thank you with all my heart!' replied Nelly, in her quaintly graceful way. 'It is very good of you, madame' (the word slipped out naturally; somehow anything pretty and pleasant always unconsciously recalled Rochette and the old sunny out-of-doors life there), 'very good indeed of you to have thought of it. Nothing could have given me greater

pleasure. We have many flowers at The Feathers, but all garden ones, which it seems to me should never be cut: it is like imprisoning larks and thrushes; whereas these beautiful things are like canaries;' and she half buried her face in them.

Who could feel dignified or petulant in such company? Who would care where the flowers came from, or whose hands had gathered them, in the luxuriant brightness of their presence? Certainly not these two children, well content with their summer-day life of sunshine and peaceful gladness.

Nelly turned for a moment to beckon to Georgie, who, having had enough of her self-imposed penance, flew down the bank nothing loath, and in a moment was joining her little hands in delight at the sight of the wonderful flowers. When Eleanor turned again to the carriage, she became conscious that another pair of eyes were fixed on her with a very kindly gaze. They belonged to Mrs. Nugent, the third lady of the party, who, without the least notion of the identity of this young Mrs. Martin with the wife of her old friend at Easterton, was considerably attracted by the young lady's prepossessing appearance and graceful, perhaps slightly original, manners.

'Excuse me,' she said in her pleasant voice, 'for

suggesting what you probably know, if you are so fond of flowers—that if you change the water every day and cut each stem afresh, and put a very little salt in the water, you may keep your pretty bouquet in beauty for several days.’

‘And it is a very good thing to put cut flowers in a different room at night from the one they are in during the day,’ put in Miss Berners, rather more eagerly than was usual with her, taking her cue from Mrs. Nugent’s cordial manner to the stranger, but not impossibly touched also by the sweet heartiness of Eleanor’s thanks.

For the most spoilt of London beauties cannot have left *all* girlish simplicity behind her among the despised playthings of the past. So thought Mrs. Nugent as she turned and looked at Amethyst. She had known the girl from babyhood; known too her terrible disadvantages—her foolishly doting mother, and the atmosphere of narrow class-prejudice, intellectual barrenness, universal adulation, and unbroken prosperity in which she had been reared; and was one of the last to judge her sharply. And then, too, Amethyst was *so* pretty, and could look, O, *so* sweet, when she chose; and most people chose to stand their best with Mrs. Nugent somehow.

‘Indeed?’ said that lady, in reply to the girl’s suggestion. ‘I don’t think I ever heard that before, Amethyst; but I daresay there may be something in it.’

‘O yes, indeed,’ Miss Berners went on; ‘I have often and often tried it in London. Not that I hadn’t plenty of flowers, but if—’ And she stopped and laughed a little, more pleasantly than when she laughed at the countryman’s indignation the day of the accident.

‘If you had any special bouquets you could not bear to see perish, I suppose,’ said Mrs. Nugent good-naturedly.

And Amethyst’s lovely face looked up at her in half-saucy, half-smiling confession.

‘I wonder if they were Mr. Chesney’s,’ was the thought that first glanced through Eleanor’s mind; and ‘What can he be made of, not to be bewitched by her?’ was the second.

But Mrs. Nugent resumed her advice.

‘I really cannot say if Miss Berners’ plan is a good one; but it would be worth trying. But, I can assure you, *my* recipes are to be depended on. My girls have often followed them with success.’

‘Thank you very much for telling me,’ answered

Nelly. 'I have heard of changing the water regularly, but never of cutting the stems, or of salt.— And thank you also, Miss Berners,' she added more stiffly, as she turned towards Amethyst, 'for your suggestion.'

And she then glanced over at Mrs. Berners, who sat at the farther side of the carriage, and began to say good-bye, repeating her thanks for the flowers. Mrs. Berners roused up, as if startled, in a queer, sudden sort of way, which was a habit with her.

'But there is something else,' she ejaculated; 'dear me, I was forgetting!—Amethyst my dear, the grapes for the little girl, you know, my love,— where are they? I do hope they've not been forgotten!'

'They are outside in a basket, mamma; they're all right,' replied the young lady, in the not very pleasing tone in which she usually addressed her mother. 'You don't want them now? We must leave them as we pass Mrs. —'s — as we pass the house. It is a long way from here.'

'O yes, to be sure!' agreed her mother; 'I was quite forgetting. Would you not like us to leave the flowers also at your house, Mrs. Martin?'

But by this time the treasures were in the hands

of Georgie ; and her appealing ‘ *Do let me carry them, Nelly ! Look there, how I have put my handkerchief round them, and my hands are not hot !* ’ was not to be resisted.

‘ It is not so very far, thank you,’ said Mrs. Marshall ; ‘ not more than two miles. Georgie and I often walk much farther than that, and carrying quite big baskets sometimes. O, the flowers are nothing ; we can take them with us very nicely ; they will only make the way seem shorter.’

‘ What capital walkers you must be ! ’ said Mrs. Nugent admiringly.

‘ You never walk as far as Parkhurst, I suppose ? ’ inquired Mrs. Berners half hesitatingly : ‘ It is quite five miles, is it not, Amy dear, from Chesney ? But if ever you should come so far, we should be so pleased if you would come in and see the gardens, and the house and the pictures. And if we were out, I should leave orders with the housekeeper to show you everything. I will mention your name to her—don’t let me forget, Amethyst—and then, whenever you come, you will have no difficulty.’

A flush rose all over Eleanor’s pale face, but her voice was perfectly gentle and courteous as she replied,

‘Thank you ; but it will be quite unnecessary to do so ; there is not the slightest probability of my ever going so far as to Parkhurst, if that is the name of your house.’

Mrs. Berners was in blissful ignorance of having said anything but what was most cordial and suitable.

‘Ah, well,’ she said, ‘there is no saying but what you may be tempted to come so far some day ; and in case you do, don’t forget what I have said. Just give your name to the housekeeper, and it will be all right.’ And she bowed graciously in sign of adieu.

Amethyst, who had been looking the other way, giving no attention to what her mother was saying, bowed too with much greater courtesy than on the day she had hurried out of *The Feathers* in a bad temper ; for now there had been nothing specially to annoy her, and she felt too that Mrs. Nugent’s eye was upon her. But when it came to that lady’s turn to bow farewell, she impulsively, to the surprise of all present, not impossibly to her own, held out her hand, and cordially pressed for a moment that of the young stranger, whose name even she hardly knew, of whose very existence she had been in ignorance ten minutes before ; and as she did so, there cleared from her

brow the expression of annoyance and indignation which had rested on it since Mrs. Berners' unlucky and strangely-worded invitation. Then she smiled and nodded to the beautiful little girl who held the flowers so tenderly, and they drove off.

'May I ask the name of that young lady?' inquired Mrs. Nugent of Mrs. Berners, after a minute or two's silence in the carriage.

'O dear, yes!' replied Amethyst's mother; 'she is a Mrs. Martin. They live in a little house at Chesney; her husband is a lawyer, I think, at Easterton or Wolding. Mr. Berners knows him by name, though he is not our lawyer. It was just opposite their house that our horses stopped, after running away in that frightful way last Friday, you know, Mrs. Nugent. We had to go in there to rest, and Mrs. Martin was very attentive; that was why we were bringing her these flowers and fruit. It is difficult to know how to repay an obligation to these sort of people; but she is really rather an attractive young woman, and so modest.'

'I don't think she is particularly modest, mamma,' retorted Amethyst, undeterred by Mrs. Nugent's presence. 'It struck me her manners were remarkably free-and-easy—rather too much so for my taste.'

Mrs. Nugent remained perfectly silent.

‘Are you quite sure the young lady’s name is Martin?’ she asked again, turning towards Mrs. Berners. ‘Do you not think it is Marshall?’

‘Perhaps so,’ answered Mrs. Berners indifferently. ‘I have a bad memory for names of that kind. I am always calling Robinson Roberts, and my maid Ford Ward. No, I mean to say I am always calling Ward Ford. Yes, now I think of it, I believe the name *is* Marshall.—What do you say, Amy dearest?’

‘I haven’t the remotest idea, mamma. But what does it matter?—O, I beg your pardon, Mrs. Nugent; I forgot it was you that asked about it. Do you know anything of these Martins or Marshalls?’

‘Not of Mrs. Marshall personally,’ replied Mrs. Nugent, controlling herself, though very much inclined to give Miss Amethyst ‘a bit of her mind.’ ‘Her husband I have known and esteemed for many years; for he is much older than this young wife. To *me*, her appearance and manners seemed unusually prepossessing. Certainly, she has been brought up abroad, which is in many ways an advantage to a girl.’

Miss Berners looked slightly annoyed, and felt

rather small, but consoled herself with the reflection, that 'every one said Mrs. Nugent was absurdly Quixotic, and quite radical in her notions, and so easily taken in.' But no more was said concerning Mr. Marshall's wife—not even when they stopped at The Feathers, and the basket of grapes was handed out; for Mrs. Nugent purposely allowed the subject to drop, feeling reluctant to confess that she herself was prevented from showing any kindness or attention to the two young creatures who had impressed her so favourably. But she regretted more than ever the Squire's 'contrariness' in the matter of her calling on Mrs. Marshall. She had tried him again, more than once, but he was not to be moved; and notwithstanding his variability and inconsistency, there were occasions, as she knew to her cost, on which he took up a notion and stuck to it, like the very spirit of 'dourness' personified.

Meanwhile the sisters were walking home slowly along the dusty high-road. Nelly was unusually silent, and Georgie caught the infection, notwithstanding her delight in the possession of the exquisite flowers.

'Is anything the matter, Nelly?' inquired the child; 'you don't talk at all. It was kind of the

lady to bring us the flowers, wasn't it, Nelly?' But as she said it, she looked up half doubtfully into her sister's face.

The question struck Nelly with a little sense of reproof.

'Yes, dear,' she said stoutly, '*it was* kind, very kind. There is nothing the matter; I was only thinking. I don't understand things sometimes, and that teases me. I hope I am not getting unamiable or haughty,' she went on in a lower voice, more as if thinking aloud than talking to her little sister. 'I never used to be so, I am sure. I suppose it is just that English people are different, and perhaps I seem different to them. But O, Georgie darling,' she added, after a little pause, 'I do so wish mamma was here sometimes, just to advise me a little, and keep me right!'

Georgie looked up sympathisingly, and lovingly stroked her sister's hand.

'Poor Nelly!' she murmured; 'I know it is much worse for you than for me. I can feel quite pleased now, thinking mamma must be so happy to be with papa; for you know you are just as good as another mamma to me, Nelly, and so I don't miss her as much as you do. But still, Nelly, you've got Mr.

Marshall, and he is very kind. I didn't always think so, but I do now.'

Eleanor smiled a little at the tables being so turned as that Georgie reminded her of a fact she herself had been so slow to acknowledge.

'He is indeed, Georgie,' she said cheerfully; 'I knew you would come to think so. Yes, we are very well off indeed; and there's nothing really to be put out about.'

Still she determined on relating the little adventure to Mr. Marshall, which she did on his return that evening.

'I did right, did I not,' she inquired of him, rather timidly, 'to decline going to Parkhurst in that sort of way?'

'Most certainly,' he replied; 'it is just the sort of thing I can trust to your good sense.' And he patted her shoulder approvingly, and laughed a little at the recital of Eleanor's quiet rejoinder to Mrs. Berners' condescending invitation. 'I dislike that Mrs. Berners exceedingly,' he went on; 'and I did not admire her daughter either when I saw her at Lady Carthew's marriage. I don't think you would care for their acquaintance, Eleanor, on any terms.'

'I don't think I should,' replied Mrs. Marshall,

feeling quite relieved and happy; 'but I should like to know the lady who was with them. She had such a nice face, Mr. Marshall. Who could she be?'

'A stranger very likely,' answered he. 'What was she like?' But before Eleanor had time to answer, he exclaimed hurriedly, 'By the bye, I am forgetting to tell you of a letter from my sister. She wants to know if we can have her next week for a few days' visit.'

'Of course we can,' said Eleanor most heartily, delighted at the idea of showing hospitality to any relation of her husband's. 'Shall I write and tell her how glad we shall be to see her?'

'Yes, pray do,' said Mr. Marshall. So a letter was dispatched bidding Mrs. Ellison welcome on whatever day it best suited her to come.

Though it was now September, the weather was still exceedingly hot. Far too hot, Georgie declared, for lessons or anything more fatiguing than sitting up in the oak-tree, or lying on the grass. The day Mrs. Ellison was expected to arrive, Georgie was in a specially idle mood; and finding that Nelly's various little preparations for doing honour to the expected guest were concluded by an early hour in the

afternoon, she teased her sister to come into the garden and join her in her play.

'There are three hours till it's time for Mrs. Ellison to come,' argued Georgie; for the visitor was expected by the express, which only stopped at the large stations, and Mr. Marshall had arranged to meet her at Easterton, and escort her to Chesney about his usual hour. 'O, Nelly,' as a sudden thought struck her, 'do let us go down to the brook and wade along it. It's such a time since you waded with me, and at Rochette it was such fun on hot days; and, O, I am so hot to-day!'

So was Nelly, and the proposal was very tempting. They left their boots and stockings on the bank, and went paddling about in the cool rippling water as delightedly as any two ragged urchins playing truant from school. The smooth shining pebbles were rather treacherous footing sometimes; and the amusement now and then assumed a pleasantly exciting character, when Georgie all but capsized bodily, or when a sly push from her nearly overcame Nelly's own equilibrium. Then Georgie took it in her head that she would like to catch some fish, and dabbled in the water till she was really as disreputable a little figure as one could wish to see, in the vain hope of

laying violent hands on the wretched minnows darting by, whose whole theory of the universe was shaken to its foundations by the monstrous and unprecedented appearance of the two little white gleaming feet which had ventured to invade their dominions. Half tired at last with laughing at Georgie's antics, Eleanor sat down on the bank, and began lazily to put on her stockings, calling to her sister to follow her example. She was in the rather embarrassing condition of the nursery-rhyme hero,

‘ My son John,
One shoe off, and one shoe on,’

when a voice from behind her, addressing her by name, made her jump. It was a strange unfamiliar voice, and when she turned round to see from whence it proceeded, she discovered to her horror that its owner was a middle-aged lady, who, though she had never seen her before, Nelly felt instinctively could be no other than her expected guest, her husband's sister, on whom of all people in the world she was perhaps most anxious just then to make a favourable impression. There she stood, staring at the unfortunate young wife as if unable to believe the evidence of her senses; her own irreproachable brown-silk travelling dress daintily upheld in one hand to pre-

serve it from contact with the sedgy grass, on which, defiant of rheumatism, careless of toads and tadpoles, Nelly was comfortably seated, one white foot still but half dried, guiltless of stocking or boot.

‘Mrs. Marshall?’ quoth the intruder in a solemn voice; ‘but, no, I beg your pardon, I *must* be mistaken.’

‘No, you are not mistaken,’ replied Nelly, rising as she spoke, and looking charming enough, with her flushed cheeks and half-dignified, half-deprecating air of embarrassment, to have won on the spot the heart of any one but a Mrs. Ellison,—‘I am Mrs. Marshall. That is to say, I am Eleanor—to *you*, that is to say, for I am sure you are Mrs. Ellison.’ And letting her long black dress fall to the ground, she held out the hand thus disengaged to her husband’s sister, calmly holding the poor foot’s unappropriated garments in the other. Mrs. Ellison shook hands as if she hardly knew what she was doing; she was growing more and more bewildered. The young lady’s manner was unexceptionable, but what in the world was she doing walking about in the ‘dirt’ (Mrs. Ellison’s expression for everything but pavement or newly-mown lawn) with bare feet? Could it be the fashion in that place she had been brought

up in ? A vague remembrance occurred to her of having heard that in some parts of Scotland, of which barbarous country she knew considerably less than Dr. Johnson, shoes and stockings were not fashionable attire. Perhaps it was the same in Switzerland ? Suddenly a bright thought struck her.

‘ You have met with some accident, I fear, Mrs. Marshall ? Have you hurt your foot ? A thorn, perhaps ? ’

But before Eleanor could have profited by the suggestion, had she been so minded, a new and still more startling apparition put the possibility of her doing so to flight. Nelly, with the exception of her feet, was in a perfectly orthodox and presentable condition ; Georgie, be it remembered, was dabbled from head to foot ; and, to add to her remarkable appearance, her shaggy locks were surmounted by a long branch of ivy twisted into a wreath, with great bunches of flowering grasses and water forget-me-nots stuck in here and there promiscuously. The fabrication of this striking addition to her charms had absorbed her for the last ten minutes, and rendered her deaf to her sister’s voice ; and now, little less surprised by Mrs. Ellison’s appearance than that lady was by hers, she stood immovable, like the mesmer-

ised image of a very dirty little naiad escaped from the 'water babies' nursery.

'Georgie,' exclaimed poor Eleanor in despair, 'run home and change your wet clothes at once.'

Off flew Georgie, heedless of the shoes and stockings peacefully reposing on the grass—or in the brook, for all she cared. It was not the first, by a great many times, that her clever little feet had run up the garden-path in this independent manner; and Eleanor seized the opportunity of Mrs. Ellison's eyes following the eccentric little figure in fascinated horror, to pull on her own boot hastily—the stocking she deftly concealed in her pocket; and feeling thus considerably more at ease, she was able to answer Mrs. Ellison's next question with her usual self-control.

'May I ask if that is your sister, Mrs. Marshall?' inquired that lady, with more than her usual punctiliousness.


'Yes, that is Georgie,' replied Eleanor. 'She is rather a tomboy, I fear; but I don't know that she will be any the worse for that in the end.' (Here a suspicion of a sceptical 'Humph!' emerged from Mrs. Ellison.) 'She is very fond of paddling in the brook these hot afternoons' (an ejaculation of 'So it

appears!), 'and to-day she persuaded me to join her in her play. But I am exceedingly sorry I did so,' she went on, in her simple sincere tones, raising her frank eyes to Mrs. Ellison's face as she spoke; 'it must have seemed to you such an extraordinary reception. And I have been looking forward with so much pleasure to making your acquaintance. You see, we did not expect you till six with Mr. Marshall, thinking you were coming by the express to Easterton; but all the same, I am terribly vexed with myself.'

It was not in human nature not to feel a little mollified. Nelly heard the softening in the tone, though she hardly understood the relevancy of the words, by which, however, condonation of the offence was evidently intended to be conveyed.

'Say no more about it, my dear. I am quite aware you have been brought up abroad.'

Whatever Mrs. Ellison had chosen to say, Nelly, under present circumstances, would have felt herself bound over to accept meekly, and she was glad to turn the conversation to the subject of her visitor's premature appearance. There had been an accident to an express train in some other part of the kingdom a couple of days before, it seemed, and Mrs.



Ellison, on reading of it in her beloved morning paper the day before, had made up her mind to risk her august person in nothing more 'go ahead' than a 'parliamentary.'

'Not that I am in the least nervous,' she condescended to explain; 'but after an accident, caused by such culpable negligence as that to the express at Bloxmore, I feel it a duty to society to protest against such—manslaughter I may call it, in a conspicuous manner.'

Eleanor felt rather impressed — Mrs. Ellison's way of expressing herself carried great weight with it — and thought society should feel very much obliged. Mr. Marshall's sister appeared gratified by the respectful attention her words elicited, and held forth a little longer in the same strain.

'Then I think I had better find some way of letting Mr. Marshall know of your arrival, had I not?' suggested Eleanor; 'as he was to meet you at Easterton station.'

But this, Mrs. Ellison assured her was unnecessary, as the change in her plans had been already communicated to 'William' ('Who was he?' Eleanor was on the point of asking) by a letter he would have received at Easterton that morning.

‘O, how clever of you to remember he leaves Chesney before the letters come in the morning!’ exclaimed Eleanor quite innocently, but the little remark did her good service.

On the whole, inauspicious as had been the opening of their acquaintance, they were getting on better than might have been expected; and poor Betsey, when she appeared herself, in honour of the great lady, in the drawing-room with the glass of sherry, which Mrs. Ellison preferred in the way of refreshment to the new-fangled absurdity of afternoon tea, felt quite relieved in her mind at the sight of the pleasant understanding between her young mistress and ‘master’s sister,’ an object of profound awe to the good soul for many a past year. For Georgie had relieved her indignation at the disagreeable conclusion of their charming afternoon, by rating Betsey soundly when she confessed to being the culprit who had put it into ‘that ugly old lady’s’ head to look for them out in the garden.

Georgie made her appearance before long in the drawing-room, with smooth hair and clean frock, and shook hands submissively enough with the newcomer, who proceeded to put her through a cross-examination on the subject of her studies, which

the little girl did not at all admire. The result, therefore, was not satisfactory. Georgie loved music, but hated practising; looked upon writing as an altogether unnecessary accomplishment, almost as detestable as plain sewing, or indeed sewing of any kind; and despised all literature but fairy tales. Finally, she silenced her tormentor by observing that it was holidays just now, and she thought talking about lessons was nearly as bad as doing them; at which point in the conversation, Nelly thought it time to interfere by telling Georgie to run out to the gate and watch if she saw Mr. Marshall coming; and the child gladly availed herself of the implied permission to leave the uncongenial society in the drawing-room.


Mrs. Ellison looked solemn, but was wise enough to choose amiability as her best policy. Besides, she was really unusually attracted by Eleanor personally, and still more by the deferential manner the young wife thought it only right to assume to one so much her elder, and the near relation of the husband to whom she owed so much; which becoming demeanour gained her the honour of being put down in her sister-in-law's mental memorandum-book as 'a young person with many good points, notwithstanding the

great disadvantages of her up-bringing. Sadly ignorant and inexperienced, but very ready to take a little good advice from one qualified to give it. But as for the sister—ah, that was a very different matter;’ and Mrs. Ellison in thought shook her head over poor Georgie’s deficiencies and delinquencies. ‘She had seen from the first that *that* would never do. Her brother’s house would soon not be his own unless that spoilt child were kept in her proper place, and—sent to school.’

Nelly felt annoyed with Georgie for not having displayed a little more diplomacy in her replies to Mrs. Ellison, and having made herself appear more ignorant than she really was. Georgie’s education was certainly not Mrs. Ellison’s concern; but still, the interest she expressed in it must be kindly meant; and, in any case, it ill became herself or her sister, thought Nelly, to receive with anything but respect whatever Mr. Marshall’s sister might choose to say. Probably, however, it would have mattered little how Georgie had comported herself, so far as the direct effect on Mrs. Ellison’s mind was concerned. She had come down to Chesney fully resolved that her brother and his family should have the benefit of her advice in *some* way, and foreseeing

it as probable that the removal of the obnoxious sister would be the first labour to which her efforts would be called upon to direct themselves, she had taken some trouble to procure the address of a thoroughly unexceptionable establishment, to which she hoped before long to have the pleasure of seeing the unruly little damsel consigned. And in this, to do her justice, she was uninfluenced by any selfish or malicious motives, unless intense devotion to her own prejudices, and an inextinguishable love of meddling in other people's affairs, can be said to come under the former head.

But for some little time the sisters remained in blissful ignorance of what was brewing; and Mrs. Ellison's stay passed peacefully enough, and was half over before anything disagreeable was mooted. One incident distressed Nelly rather unreasonably, she said to herself, and that was Mr. Marshall's way of receiving her confession of the unlucky wading expedition the afternoon of Mrs. Ellison's arrival. He had hitherto been so indulgent, so ready to take a laughable view of any little misadventure or escapade of Georgie's, that his grave and annoyed manner of treating the present affair, in which the child was really innocent, hurt Eleanor sharply. She did



not know that his sister's influence was already at work; that even before she herself had had an opportunity of speaking to him alone, one or two judiciously dropped expressions of Mrs. Ellison's had not been without their effect, had roused a sudden misgiving in Mr. Marshall's conscientious mind as to whether all was for the best in present arrangements.

'I am very sorry for this having happened, my dear Eleanor,' he said, in a tone of disapproval that was new to his young wife—'very sorry. I have a great respect for my sister's judgment, and should have liked both you and Georgie to impress her favourably. I am not blaming you, my dear. Any one can see it is only your love for the child that is apt to make you over-indulgent, and to give in to all her whims. I warned you not long ago, you may remember, that I saw she needed driving with a firm hand on the reins—yes, a very firm hand;' and he looked rather pleased with the neatness of the illustration.

It was true; Eleanor remembered it well; but that warning had been given in a very different tone from the present.

'I know you did,' she said meekly; 'but truly,

Mr. Marshall, Georgie was in no way to blame this time.'

Her meekness softened, but her persistence chafed him.

'Well, well, my dear,' he replied somewhat testily, 'the thing is not worth putting yourself out about. Perhaps, after all, it is as well that the question of Georgie's management has come up just now, while we can have the benefit of my sister's excellent advice. And you must remember, my dear, whatever I may think it right to do will be from the best of motives. Georgie is my ward as well as your sister, and I feel the responsibility a heavy one.'

'Whatever I think it right to do.' What could Mr. Marshall mean? Eleanor puzzled her head for several days to answer this question, without courage to inquire it of her husband. When its meaning first broke upon her, in the course of a long talk with Mrs. Ellison, that lady, having undertaken 'to bring her to see it in its right light, as really the best thing for the child,' she felt simply stunned: the idea was too monstrous ever to take shape in reality.

'Georgie go to school!' she exclaimed, with blanching lips and terrified eyes—'Georgie go to school, away from me! O no, Mrs. Ellison, that

could never be. Mamma would never have allowed it. Why, the certainty of keeping her with me was my great—' but here she fortunately stopped.

To all Mrs. Ellison's unanswerable arguments—the advantage to Georgie, the difficulty of giving her a good education in a country village, the desirability of companions of her own age—she opposed the same unreasoning assertion, 'Mrs. Ellison, it cannot be,' till her sister-in-law's not very great stock of patience (for it was new to her to meet with opposition to any of her pet schemes) was all but exhausted. Then Mrs. Ellison tried a new tack: she hinted at Mr. Marshall's feelings on the subject, and the propriety of their being consulted. Eleanor thereupon took her up more sharply than she had expected.

'Did Mr. Marshall tell you, Mrs. Ellison, that he disliked Georgie's living with us?' she asked in a forced voice.

'He expressed himself as exceedingly anxious that she should go to school,' replied Mrs. Ellison evasively.

'Ah, I see,' returned Eleanor coldly. 'Thank you, Mrs. Ellison, for the interest you have taken in the matter, and the trouble you have given yourself. I will speak to Mr. Marshall myself.' Which

she did. But not another word could her sister-in-law extract from her on the subject.

Mr. Marshall was perplexed and distressed by the way in which Eleanor 'had taken it up.' He blamed himself in his heart for the cowardice which had induced him to consent to any one but himself broaching to his wife a proposal which he might have known could not, at first sight, be other than painful and startling; and this unconfessed self-blame made his manner a little harder than it otherwise would have been. He denied being *influenced* by any feeling of dislike to the residence of Georgie in his household; and Eleanor, of course, believed him; but unfortunately, and in reality accidentally, he did not deny the *existence* of the feeling; and his wife, prejudiced already by Mrs. Ellison's hints, was quick to mark the omission.

'My only motive,' repeated Mr. Marshall, 'is my desire for the child's good. I am responsible for her receiving the best education I can give her, and for her being under firm and judicious control. And with all my respect for your excellent intentions and good sense, you must allow me to say, my dear, that I do *not* think you are firm enough with her; and in this opinion I am supported by my

sister, a woman of mature judgment and great experience.'

Poor Nelly! she was driven to play her last card, one she would much have preferred not to use at all.

'But, Mr. Marshall,' she faltered, 'you *promised*; you promised when—when—it was settled about our marriage, that Georgie and I should not be separated.'

He stopped in his pacing up and down the room, and looked at her gravely.

'No, Eleanor,' he said quietly, 'you are mistaken. I never made such a promise. It would have been contrary to my principles to do so—to promise blindly anything which circumstances might prove to be to the injury of the persons concerned. There was assuredly a tacit understanding that Georgie's *home* should be with us; and from this I shall never draw back. But that is a different thing from proposing a temporary separation, manifestly for the child's good.'

It was, and Eleanor could not deny it. But, O, how she wished Mrs. Ellison had never come to disturb their peaceful content!

'She is so *very* young,' she whispered; for by this time she could hardly control her voice—'only a few months past ten.'

‘She is, certainly,’ said Mr. Marshall in a softened tone, not sorry at the bottom of his heart to perceive the first glimmer of a compromise,—‘only ten ; poor little thing !’

Nelly seized her opportunity.

‘Let me keep her till she is twelve,’ she exclaimed, clasping her hands in desperate appeal ; ‘O, let me keep her till then, and I will promise to make no difficulty when the time comes ; and I will be so particular with her till then—not let her trouble you in any way, and get her on so well in her lessons. She is really not backward in them. O, let me keep her till she is twelve ; it will be in less than two years ;’ and then, losing all self-control, she burst into irrepressible tears.

Poor Mr. Marshall was greatly troubled : he had never felt himself cruel before. He resolved to act for himself, and throw his sister’s indignation to the winds.

‘It shall be as you wish, my dear,’ he said very kindly, stooping over his wife where she sat, with her head buried in her hands, her girlish frame shaken with her sobs,—‘it shall be as you wish. You shall keep her till she is twelve ;’ and he stroked her soft hair soothingly.

‘Thank you,’ said Eleanor. It was all she could say; and she started up to run out of the room, ashamed of her agitation. But her husband called her back.

‘Don’t run away just yet,’ he said. ‘Come back for a moment, and tell me you do not think me hard or unkind. You do not know, my dear, how that would distress me. I am so anxious, so very anxious, to make you happy. You have given me a great deal I cannot give you, and I knew and approved of the motives which made the idea of life with an old man for your husband less unattractive than it would naturally have been to you without them. But we have been very happy hitherto—I have, at least; do not let any cloud come between us now. Believe me, my endeavour will always be to act by Georgie as if she were my own daughter. Look at me, my dear, and tell me you do not think me hard or unkind.’

It was an unusually long speech for Mr. Marshall, and Nelly felt that every word of it came from his heart. She had kept her face turned away while he spoke, but now she looked up at him through her tears, and whispered gently:

‘Don’t speak that way. You are very, very good to us.’

So 'the threatened breach was averted; and all seemed at peace.

'You will not let this make any difference in your manner to my sister, I hope, my dear?' asked Mr. Marshall. 'It was sincere interest in Georgie's welfare that led to her expressing any opinion on the subject. I have been so pleased to see how well you and she got on together, and I should exceedingly regret this making any difference.'

Eleanor of course promised that she would not allow this to be the case. And she did her best honestly. But Mrs. Ellison was naturally considerably aggrieved at having won but a half triumph where she had confidently counted on a whole; and though they were all particularly civil to each other, I think no one was very sorry when, two days after, her visit came to an end, and she returned to the dreary magnificence of her house in —— Square.

Nothing could have been kinder than Mr. Marshall's manner both to Eleanor and Georgie since the evening on which he had consented to the compromise. He seemed to wish the whole matter, in the mean time at least, to be forgotten or ignored, forbidding Eleanor to broach it at present to her sister; in which she obeyed him.

But though the 'nearly two years' was still a long way off, Nelly felt like a traitor every time she looked at Georgie; and somehow nothing seemed quite the same as before Mrs. Ellison's visit to The Feathers.

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